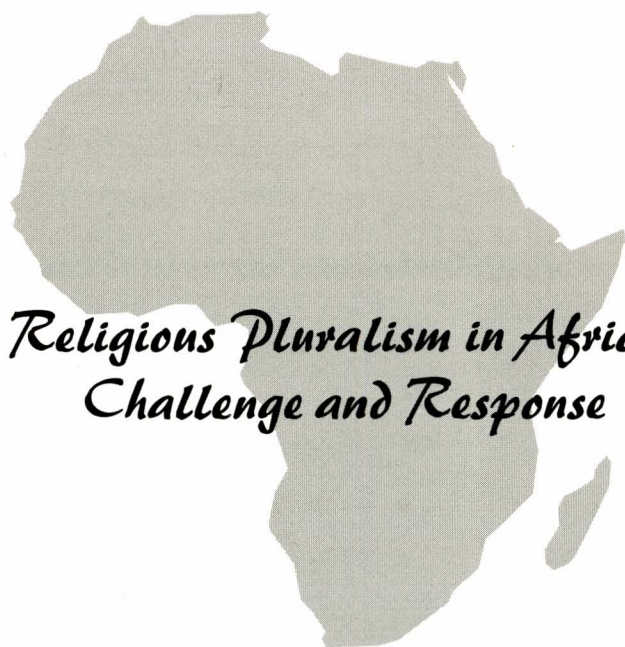
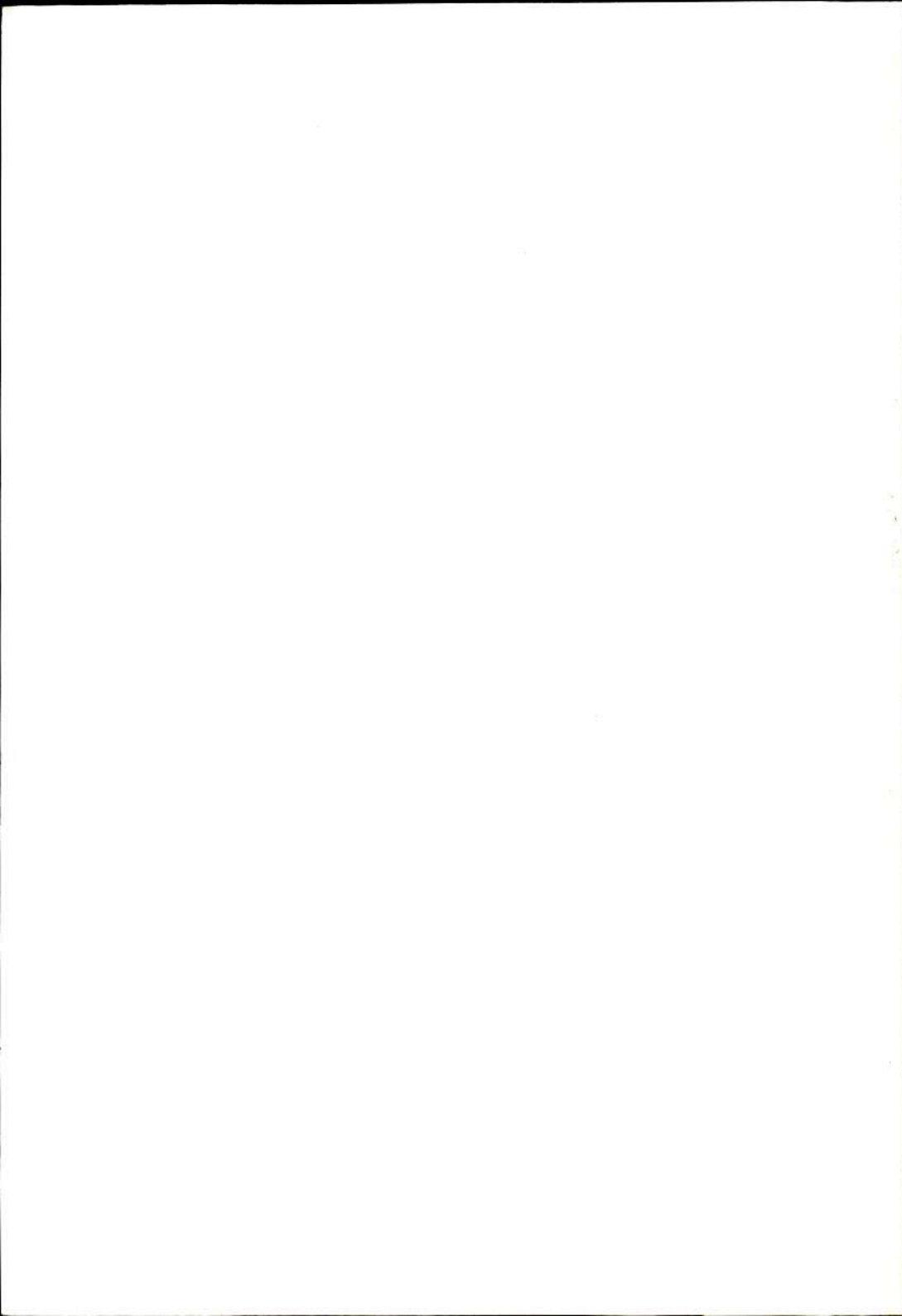


Lutheran World Federation

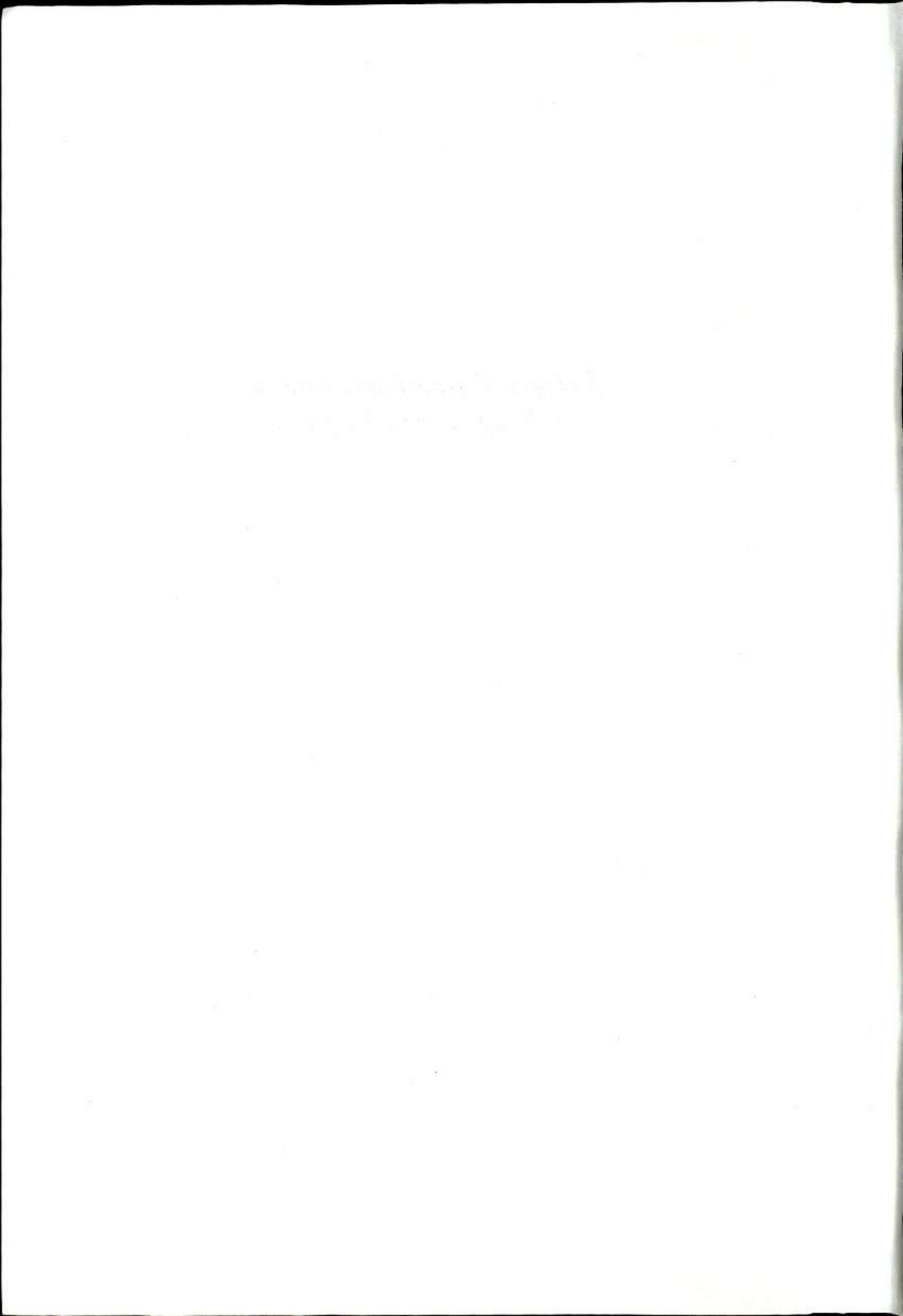
# LWF STUDIES



*Religious Pluralism in Africa:  
Challenge and Response*



*Religious Pluralism in Africa:  
Challenge and Response*





# *Religious Pluralism in Africa: Challenge and Response*

Consultation held in Dakar, Senegal, December 1994

*Edited by Hance A.O. Mwakabana*

*Department for Theology & Studies  
The Lutheran World Federation  
Geneva 1996*

© 1996 *The Lutheran World Federation*

*Copy editing: Corinna Ascher and Dorothea Millwood*

*Layout: Janet Bond-Nash*  
*Office for Communication Services*

*ISBN 3-906706-29-X*  
*ISSN 1025-2290 (LWF Studies)*

*Published by: The Lutheran World Federation*  
*150 rte de Ferney*  
*1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland*

*Printed in Switzerland*

## CONTENTS

---

Foreword	
<i>Ishmael Noko</i> .....	9
Preface	
<i>Hance A.O. Mwakabana</i> .....	11
Introduction	
<i>Hance A.O. Mwakabana</i> .....	15
The Church and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism: A Historical and Contemporary Perspective	
<i>Zablon Nthamburi</i> .....	25
The Challenge of Religious Pluralism in Africa: Case Studies	
West Africa, Nigeria	
<i>David L. Windibiziri</i> .....	35
Eritrea	
<i>Asfaha Mehari</i> .....	42
The Challenge of Religious Pluralism in a Global Context	
A Contribution from the European Experience	
<i>Kajsa Ahlstrand</i> .....	47
A Contribution from the Asian Experience	
<i>Prasanna Kumari</i> .....	53
Interfaith Dialogue and the Witness of the Church in the Multifaith Context of Africa	
<i>Emmanuel O. Oyelade</i> .....	61
The Need for Interfaith Dialogue	
<i>Joseph A. Ilori</i> .....	75
A Christian Theological Response to Religious Pluralism	
<i>Charles Villa-Vicencio</i> .....	89
Summary Report .....	97
List of Participants .....	105
List of Contributors .....	111

Appendices .....	113
<i>Letter to the LWF General Secretary</i> .....	115
<i>Statement on Liberia</i> .....	117
Selected Bibliography .....	119

## FOREWORD

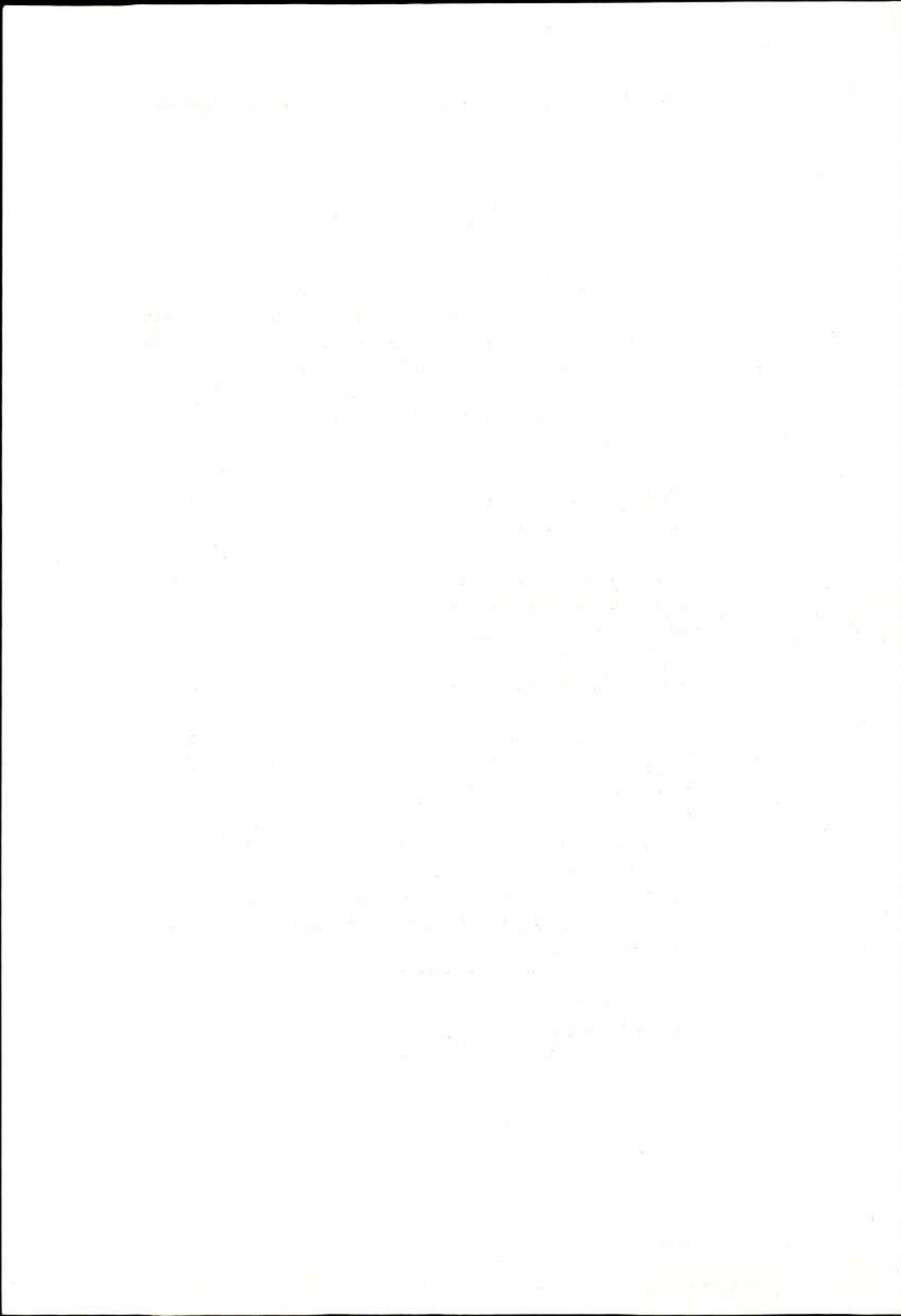
---

"Religious Pluralism in Africa: Challenge and Response" sounds very familiar because it has been and still is a subject of many conferences and publications. This particular publication brings to you, the reader, fresh and insightful perspectives and voices from those whose daily work places them face to face with the reality of religious plurality. Africa is not only a multinational continent but it is home to enormous religious diversity. Those intending to make meaningful contributions in areas such as conflict resolution, justice, peace, sustainable development and witness through service would be well advised to read this book. Noble goals such as these will not be achievable in Africa without taking into consideration the religious impact and diversity of the African reality. It must be said without any grain of doubt that religion and religious communities, whatever their plumage, hold potential for promoting peace among the nations of the world.

The contributors to this publication have put strong emphasis on the fundamental principles for meaningful dialogue. They call for healthy attitudes and for a culture of tolerance among dialogue partners.

I recommend this publication as a "handbook" for parish pastors, theological faculties, students and all those dedicated to the search for truth, justice, peace and reconciliation. Peace in this divided global village can only take root fully with genuine interfaith dialogue.

*Ishmael Noko*  
General Secretary  
The Lutheran World Federation



## PREFACE

---

The question of how the response to the phenomenon of religious pluralism in different contexts should be shaped has occupied the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and its member churches for quite some time now. Over the years, there has been a growing awareness that the search for adequate responses to the challenges posed by religious pluralism in different contexts cannot be a one-time exercise only but must constitute an increasingly intensified and continued effort. The Dakar consultation on religious pluralism, out of which the papers and the related materials contained in this volume have come, had the following objectives:

- To reflect on the significance of religious pluralism in Africa: the challenges it poses and the opportunities it offers to the Lutheran churches—as well as to the other churches in the region and globally—in their “encounter” with (people of) other faiths.
- To provide the leaders of the LWF member churches with an opportunity to reflect together on the kind of approach and attitude to be adopted when relating to people of other faiths as their churches faithfully seek to present the Christian witness in the African context.
- To promote a favorable environment among LWF member churches in Africa in cooperation with other churches in the region for continuing theological reflection on the general implications of religious pluralism for them in their life and work as they move into the next century.



## *Preface*

Against this background, the main body of this publication is structured so as to highlight areas of specific and general concern to the LWF member churches in the African multi-faith context.

The Introduction to this publication throws a light on the reality of religious pluralism today. We live in a world that is no longer the monocultural or monoreligious world it used to be. In Africa, as on other continents, different faith communities have to reckon with the fact that they have to live side by side. Religious pluralism should not be seen as a threat to the church and its witness; for it carries the kind of dynamism that allows peoples of diverse religious beliefs and practices in any given context an active, constructive engagement on various levels.

The next part of this publication focuses on understanding religious pluralism in Africa and its challenge to the church from both a historical and a contemporary perspective. Having made a historical survey of relations between Christians and people of other faiths and an assessment of the current situation on the African continent, Bishop Dr. Zablon Nthamburi then concludes with this apt comment:

Defending our long-established positions cannot save us. The time has come when each religion must engage in a critical self-appraisal to discover ways and means of how to serve the cause of truth. It is only through such openness that we can contribute our best to a new age where what humans have in common may develop steadily. Christians in Africa will have to realize first and foremost that they, like people in other religions, are participating in the struggle for a common future.

Two case studies from Africa—Nigeria and Eritrea—give examples of concrete experiences of relations between Christians and people of other faiths.

## *Religious Pluralism in Africa: Challenge and Response*

Contributions from two other continents—Europe and Asia—make up another part of this publication. For, as we point out in the Introduction, the world has shrunk into a global village. The challenge of religious pluralism is not confined solely to one region of the world; it is global. Therefore, shared experiences on this subject cannot be but mutually enriching.

Interfaith dialogue constitutes a very important aspect of the discussions on Christians and people of other faiths. Two presentations discuss this subject more extensively: the need for dialogue (its theological virtues, its different forms, and the attitudes to be adopted in interfaith dialogue); and the nature and scope of Christian witness through dialogue within Africa's pluralistic context.

In the paper entitled "A Christian Theological Response to Religious Pluralism," the discussion revolves around two important theological comments, namely, "rediscovering the incarnation" and "reaffirming mission." They drive home the point that in the multifaith contexts in which we find ourselves, we can and should affirm the truth of our religious experience and the importance of our particular religious tradition (for us and our fellow believers) without denying the omnipresence of one God whose universal love extends to all humankind.

The summary report highlights various points brought up in the different presentations, and in plenary sessions and group discussions. It also includes some general impressions and comments about the consultation and its relevance to ongoing efforts to address issues which arise out of Africa's multifaith context at present and in the future.

Finally, I wish to thank both Corinna Ascher and Kirsi Hämmäläinen, the first for making the practical arrangements before and during the consultation, and the second for taking care of the local preparations in Dakar. Further, I wish to thank all those who took part in the consultation, and those especially who found the time to prepare a paper; and

## *Preface*

the Lutheran Church of Senegal who warmly welcomed us in Dakar.

*Hance A.O.Mwakabana*

Office for Church and People of Other Faiths  
LWF Department for Theology and Studies

Geneva, Spring 1996

## INTRODUCTION

---

*Hance A.O. Mwakabana*

### **A Conscious Religious Marketplace**

---

For a number of years now, there has been a growing interest, on the part of the LWF, in the whole subject of the church and (people of) other faiths. It is an interest inspired by the reality of the world in which we live. Ours is a world in which the coming together of people of different faiths and cultures is becoming more and more evident. The world, it has been said, has shrunk into a global village, so that societies that used to be monocultural or monoreligious have become increasingly conscious of the existence of other belief patterns in their midst. In the African context, African (Traditional) Religion, Christianity and Islam, plus a few other small faith communities, have to reckon with the fact of living side by side with each other—for better or for worse. Such a situation is equally true for the rest of the world. Referring to this phenomenon, Gerald Anderson and Thomas Stransky strike a sober note that is as true today as it was nearly two decades ago when they observed that:

Since World War II, Christians have been aware that the Church has become in fact a worldwide religious family, yet more and more a minority community. Instead of occupying a massive, majority position in the West, from which Christian churches and groups reach out to "occupy" the rest of the world, they form almost everywhere only a minority of committed faithful.... Everywhere major world religions and new spiritual movements have become more widespread and



explicitly missionary. Like it or not, the whole world has become a conscious religious marketplace in which faith meets faith, or no-faith.... No wonder, then, that a dominant missionary and pastoral issue in the remaining years of the twentieth century [and the years thereafter] is the relation of Christian faith to religious pluralism.<sup>1</sup>

The LWF Eighth Assembly in Curitiba in 1990 echoed a similar perception of the situation when it said:

Christians throughout the world are more conscious today, than ever before, of the fact that we live in a world that is religiously diverse or plural. Christians on virtually every continent find themselves in direct encounter with people of other faiths and ideologies.<sup>2</sup>

### **Background of the LWF Concern**

---

The question of how the response to the phenomenon of religious pluralism in our different contexts should, in word and deed, be shaped, has occupied the LWF for quite some time now. A brief summary of developments in this connection may suffice for our purpose.

On the basis of the report of the LWF Executive Committee to the Sixth Assembly, held in Dar es Salaam in 1977 it was resolved that:

- the Lutheran World Federation be requested to make the various resources relating to dialogue with people of other religions (e.g., WCC Sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies, study institutes) accessible to member

## *Religious Pluralism in Africa: Challenge and Response*

churches in a form which can be used in their parishes;

- the member churches assist each other to deal with the questions of practical relations with neighbours of other faiths by exchanging their experience, thinking and needs through the Lutheran World Federation.<sup>3</sup>

At that time, the LWF began to recognize that, *in the light of the increasing pluralism* of the societies in which we live, the church was challenged in a critical way to review its understanding of other faiths.

Owing to the complexity of the issues involved, it was suggested initially to start with a study program on the theology of religion; the results were then to be made available to the member churches for use where needed. In 1979, after due preparations, a small group of specialists was convened who considered the question and made recommendations on what kind of program should be undertaken.

In the 70s and early 80s, the subject of the "encounter with people of other faiths and ideologies" was dealt with in the then LWF Department of Studies, under the general theme of "*Christian witness in the world.*" In the beginning, the focus was on Judaism, Marxism and Maoism; later it included Islam and the New Religious Movements (NRMs) in the West.

Increased concern for relations with people of other faiths in the different contexts in which LWF member churches found themselves led to the creation, in 1984, of a special desk in the LWF Department of Studies, named "Desk for Church and People of Other Faiths and Ideologies." The name is still the same today. The general emphasis in the work of this office has been on a critical review of our theological self-understanding in relation to people of other faiths.

The Curitiba Assembly reflected a deepening awareness of the need, on the part of the LWF and its member churches, for a response to the challenge of the situation, based not on hatred and prejudice, but on love and understanding. It said:

Our response in the midst of religious diversity, however, must not be motivated by fear of the other whose faith and/or culture is different.... Awareness that we Christians are one religious community among others can engender a sense of insecurity or threat. Christians should learn to look at this situation positively as an opportunity to revitalize our faith and convictions in interaction with others.<sup>4</sup>

### **Religious Pluralism: Language and Meaning**

The theme of our consultation has been given the title "Religious Pluralism" because it carries a better meaning for our intentions and objectives in this consultation and in all other activities under the heading "The Challenge of Religious Pluralism" undertaken in the DTS Desk for Church and People of Other Faiths. The challenge of religious pluralism lies in the fact that it characterizes our lives together, not only as people of religion but also as people who relate to one another on many other levels in our particular contexts.

Pluralism is more than mere plurality or diversity. It is a phenomenon with the kind of dynamism in it that allows for active, constructive engagement on various levels between people of diverse religious beliefs and practices in any given context.

In her book, *Encountering God*, Diana Eck offers a very useful descriptive summary of *pluralism* and, because of its relevance to the present discussion, I would like to quote here some parts at length. As Prof. Eck explains:



*First, pluralism is not the sheer fact of plurality alone, but is active engagement with plurality....* Pluralism and plurality are sometimes used as if they were synonymous. But plurality is just diversity, plain and simple—splendid, colorful, maybe even threatening. Diversity does not, however, have to affect me. I can observe it. I can even celebrate diversity, as the cliché goes. But I have to participate in pluralism. I can't just stand by and watch. Religious and cultural diversity can be found just about everywhere.... But again, the mere presence of wide-ranging religious diversity is not itself pluralism. Religious pluralism requires active positive engagement with the claims of religion and the facts of religious diversity... (p. 191f.).

*Second, pluralism is not simply tolerance, but the seeking of understanding.... Third, pluralism is not simply relativism, but assumes real commitment.* In a world of religious pluralism, commitments are not checked at the door.... While there are similarities between pluralism and relativism, the difference between the two is important: Relativism assumes a stance of openness; pluralism assumes both openness and commitment... (p. 192f.).

*Fourth, pluralism is not syncretism, but is based on respect for differences.* Syncretism is the creation of a new religion by the fusing of diverse elements of different traditions.... Of course it goes without saying that there is a process of adaptation and enculturation that is part and parcel of every tradition as it enters into the life of peoples and new cultural contexts. The discussion of whether this is or is not "syncretism" is a long one and hinges too much on terminology to detain us here.... Joining together in a new "world religion" based

on the lowest common denominator or pieced together from several religious traditions is not the goal of pluralism. In some ways, it is the antithesis of pluralism... (p. 196f.).

*Fifth, pluralism is based on interreligious dialogue....*

There is something we must know—both about the other and about ourselves—that can be found in no other way.<sup>5</sup>

The relation of Christian faith to religious pluralism, of Christians and their faith on the one hand, and on the other, of people of other faiths and their faiths, is an issue that poses a serious challenge to the churches, not only in Africa but also elsewhere in the world. It calls for a constructive engagement between Christians and people of other faiths.

### **Confessing Christ in a Multifaith Context**

Religious pluralism has implications for the life and mission of the church. As we look toward the 1997 LWF Ninth Assembly in Hong Kong, the theme of which will be "In Christ—called to witness," the question of how we do go, or should go about witnessing for Christ in the multifaith societies, not only of Africa but also of Asia, and in similar situations elsewhere in the world, assumes special importance for us.

Dialogue constitutes a very important aspect of our manner of responding to the challenge. While dialogue in its various forms is not necessarily meant to be a means of witnessing with a view to converting others to the Christian faith, it is true, nonetheless, that dialogue, as the LWF sees it, is not meant to distract the church from fulfilling its calling in Christ to witness. Reflecting on this question, the Curitiba Assembly states:

## *Religious Pluralism in Africa: Challenge and Response*

On the one hand we are called to show respect and civility to people of other faiths and ideologies, and on the other we are called and empowered by the gospel to witness to others while maintaining our distinctive Christian identity and faith.... Since the Christian gospel is a joyful message of reconciliation, it is deeply dialogical in character and encourages us to enter into conversation with and witness to people of other faiths or no faith, boldly and confidently. Dialogue implies a two-way relationship of listening and sharing.<sup>6</sup>

Referring to God's all-embracing love that demands our commitment to witness to others, the Curitiba Assembly says:

The Christian commitment to witness in the midst of other religious communities is rooted in God's love for all humanity. The God we confess in our faith is not an exclusive God but the God who reaches out in love to all nations and cultures. Our witness to people of other faiths is not only grounded in our conviction of God's universal love but also in our deeper awareness that God is the creator of all people, the bestower of good gifts to all people, and the One who is present and works in the lives and communities of people who adhere to other faiths....<sup>7</sup>

We fulfill more successfully God's command to love others when we open ourselves to dialogue with people of other faiths:

Through dialogue Christians attempt to carry out God's command to "love our neighbor as ourselves".... To engage in dialogue implies respect, concern and hospitality toward others. Dialogue



is an attitude of sensitivity, humility and openness to others. It embodies the posture of the cross in every form of our encounter with people of other faiths. Dialogue is not a disguised form of monologue.<sup>8</sup>

I hope therefore that, following the various contributions from our speakers at this consultation, we shall be able to explore further the implications of interfaith dialogue for us as Christians as we seek to give our Christian witness in our multifaith/multicultural contexts. We may discover the need honestly to re-examine some of our unnecessarily rigid inherited positions with regard to our missionary approaches, motives and attitudes towards people of other faiths in general as well as in particular.

## **Objectives**

---

In conclusion, today's multifaith society demands a reflection not only on the contextual perspective but also on the significance of other faiths as part of a reality to live with and for which we must prepare ourselves. It is this consideration that has dictated the nature of our planning for this consultation. Among others, the objectives of the consultation are:

- To reflect on the significance of religious pluralism in Africa—the challenges it poses, and the possibilities it opens for the churches on this continent, seen also in a broader global perspective.
- To promote an environment for continued theological reflection among LWF member churches, and in their relations with other Christian churches, on what it means for the Christian Church to be the Church of Christ in a situation

## *Religious Pluralism in Africa: Challenge and Response*

where the existence and growth of other faiths is a reality.

- To provide an opportunity—for people in our churches who are in a position to educate others and influence thought and action in their particular settings—for a more frank discussion about the need, on our part as Christians, to make sure we have the right kind of attitudes and approaches towards people of other faiths in our societies. This consultation is one of a number of ways in which we are making an effort to arouse and sustain interest in the broad subject of religious pluralism whose language is that of dialogue and encounter—in this sense, a constructive encounter.

### *Notes*

- <sup>1</sup> Gerald Anderson and Thomas Stransky, "Foreword," in *Mission Trends*, No. 5, N.Y., 1981, ix.
- <sup>2</sup> Curitiba 1990, *LWF Report* 28/29, p. 83.
- <sup>3</sup> "In Christ—A New Community". *The Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation*, Geneva, 1977, §§ 193-194, p. 205.
- <sup>4</sup> Curitiba, p. 83.
- <sup>5</sup> Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*, Beacon Press, Boston 1993.
- <sup>6</sup> Curitiba, p. 83.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



**THE CHURCH AND THE CHALLENGE  
OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM:  
A HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE**

---

*Zablon Nthamburi*

**A Historical Survey**

---

From the very beginning Christianity existed in a context of other religions. What was part of Judaism soon came into direct contact with the religion, culture and philosophy of the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>1</sup> A good example is Paul. He uses the language, the metaphors, traditions, and the philosophy which was non-Christian in origin of his time to explain the Christian mystery of salvation, redemption and atonement. Indeed, the history of theological reflection and theological method is the story of how different philosophical schools and cultures impinged on Christian theology to produce a theological hybrid which was baptized "Christian theology." The church, of course, had the Bible, which always remained the norm for correcting false teachings and ideologies. Through these, such philosophies tended to be transmitted.

In the beginning, Christian theology tended to be apologetic. Its main focus was on showing why Christian faith was superior to other faiths. Much of this was the result of historical and cultural relationships between the people professing Christian faith and those of other religions. From the time of Constantine and up to the colonial period other religions had no opportunity to challenge the Christian faith with force. Having originated in a religiously plural society, the early church showed much missionary zeal. Christians went out of their way to convert adherents of other faiths and to baptize them. So great was the success of their missionary endeavor that by the 4th century AD Christianity



*The Church and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism:  
A Historical and Contemporary Perspective*

had already been declared the official religion of the Roman Empire. By the 9th century the peoples of northern and eastern Europe had been Christianized. The Western world was fast becoming Christian and the triumph of Christendom left an indelible mark on European culture and civilization. The Lordship of Christ in its conquest over pagan gods had become real. The Lord (*kyrios*) had become the conqueror, and with him the church was triumphant over other religions.

In Europe, during the Middle Ages, very little mention was made of other religions. Belonging to any other religion was considered "barbaric" and "uncivilized." The Jews who persisted in the midst of Christian influence were in fact ghettoized not only physically but spiritually and psychologically.<sup>2</sup> Islam, which was right outside some of the European borders, was perceived as an enemy, as the Antichrist, who had to be fought by the sword, not only as a political enemy but as the enemy of God. The catholicity of the church became synonymous with its universality. People could now talk about *Christian* civilization and *Christian* culture. With the beginning of the age of exploration and colonization in the 16th century, Christianity encountered a new reality. The awareness was growing that there were other religions in the world which were vibrant and competing for attention with Christianity. There were close encounters with Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism and traditional religions. Theologians, sociologists, and anthropologists became busy studying other peoples, their cultures and religions. Some of the latter, for instance African Traditional Religion (ATR), would be labeled animistic, while most were seen to be polytheistic. The norm, though, for monotheism was the Christian faith. The riches of other traditions, religions and cultures were fast unfolding, and it was clear that this reality could no longer be ignored.

Religious pluralism had once more become an issue for the Christian community. The awareness that there were millions of people as yet untouched by the Christian gospel

and vastly under the influence of other religions came at a time when pietism and revivalism were at their highest point. This awareness created a strong current of missionary enthusiasm; hence the emergence of the Modern Missionary Movement in the 18th century. Its adherents believed that religious pluralism was temporary because Christianity would soon overwhelm other faiths, and its universalism would be demonstrated through massive conversions. Therefore, the missionary call was to actualize the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the Christian gospel as the only truth.

By the middle of the 19th century, Christian missions had fully embraced the idea of opening up the whole world for Christ by missionary outreach. Indeed, there were some who indeed felt that the kingdom would come during their lifetime. Preaching the gospel and promoting Western civilization and education were thought to hasten the collapse of non-Christian religions as these would not be able to withstand the onslaught of the Christian gospel. Education, technology, and medical work were seen as *preparatio evangelium* for the proclamation of Christ as the only Lord. There was an attempt to recapture the triumphalism of the early church. Christ was seen now to be not only the Lord of the Western civilization but of the whole world.

By the beginning of the 20th century, it had become disappointingly clear that non-Christian religions were not dying out. In fact, in the encounter with Christianity they were reforming themselves, thereby becoming stronger and more vibrant. To those who wanted a quicker and neater demise of non-Christian religions it was clear that a much greater effort needed to be made to understand the theology of other faiths. More and more, Christian theological reflections encompassed the study of comparative religion and the phenomenology of religions. It became increasingly clear that pluralism was not a temporary phenomenon but a persistent part of today's world. Although the Modern Missionary Movement implanted churches throughout the world, other religions have not disappeared. To complicate the

*The Church and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism:  
A Historical and Contemporary Perspective*

scene, we do not only have to contend with other religions but with secular ideologies as well. There have been varied responses to the religious situation of our time. For some Christians, it has become increasingly important to develop the dialogue with other religious traditions, because they have become conscious of the plural nature of our communities today. The aim of dialogue is not only to overcome destructive animosities and antagonism. Dialogue is an attempt to penetrate to the spiritual center of other religions and ideologies. Awareness of the continuing vitality of other religions brings into force the difficult task of evangelizing in a pluralistic world. A new realization is emerging that instead of competing with one another, religions can work positively towards transforming social, economic and political situations. There are many Christians who still feel very strongly about syncretism: the church should guard against compromising the Christian faith. There are many who would share the views of Stephen Neill when he says:

The church cannot compromise on its missionary task without ceasing to be the church. It fails to see and to accept this responsibility, it is changing the Gospel into something other than .... Naturally, to the non-Christian hearer this must sound like crazy megalomania and religious imperialism of the very worst kind. We must recognize the dangers; Christians have on many occasions fallen into both of them. But we are driven back ultimately on the question of truth.<sup>3</sup>

### **Pluralism and the Church in Africa**

---

In Africa, there are at present three main religions, namely ATR, Islam and Christianity. Other minority religions can be found as well, such as Baha'ism, Hinduism, Jainism and Judaism. There are also numerous sects and cults competing



for adherents. As for the three dominant religions, they all claim adherents throughout the continent, paying homage to one transcendent God.<sup>4</sup>

Of the three, ATR has had roots in Africa since times immemorial. Other religions came into the continent through missionary endeavors; thus Africans have embraced them alongside their own religion. Other religions, namely Christianity and Islam, have found a fertile ground in African communities. The cross and the crescent have become part and parcel of the religious scene in Africa. They claim to be African religions inasmuch as they have millions of adherents. According to Barret's 1980 statistics, 44.2 percent of the African people profess to be Christians while 41.2 percent are Muslims.<sup>5</sup>

African religious expression is defying Western theological jargon. It has resisted the attempt to categorize it into the sacred and the profane. Religion must encompass everyday life. Indeed, it embraces every sphere of life so much so that one cannot talk about a community without at the same time talking about its beliefs, hopes and essence. To accuse African Religion of having syncretistic tendencies is to miss the mark. To describe it by using traditional Christian terminology such as transcendent, omnipotent, omniscient or even monotheistic is to dress it in foreign clothes. It is characteristic of African Religion to accommodate other beliefs which may enrich it. The important question is not whether one embraces one religion to the exclusion of another. What is important is whether one's religious experience is normative and decisive for human existence.

Although many people in Africa would agree that religion significantly contributes to the development of a coherent community, not everyone would agree that it promotes peace and harmony. Some people may view religion as having divisive factors that could ignite a conflict. In fact, Islam and Christianity introduced religion to Africa as a source of conflict and war. ATR was devoid of fanaticism, heresy, ri-

*The Church and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism:  
A Historical and Contemporary Perspective*

valry and divisions, the causes of conflicts and wars that have so often been waged in the name of God. Africans conceive of God as a powerful entity who does not require to be defended by the believers. Indeed, to seek to defend God reduces him to a mere idol needing to be protected by human beings. The African God is powerful enough to be able to stand his ground without human support. We have seen many religious conflicts in Africa. Even adherents of the same religion have been in conflict, especially when there were doctrinal or ideological differences. The African traditional religious heritage provides us with a neutral ground on which Christianity and Islam in Africa can harmonize relationships and learn to speak to each other. For generations, the African religious heritage was the basis on which African spirituality was built. Because it denies the inherent dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, traditional religion continues to influence the lives of African Christians and Muslims alike. Since ATR is not afraid of syncretism, according to some estimates, about 80 percent of sub-Saharan Africans are adherents of traditional religion, despite outwardly confessing to being Christians or Muslims. Africans cannot afford to live in a religious vacuum. When Africans become Christians or Muslims, they do not abandon or reject traditional religion. No African can completely give up the deep dynamism of traditional religion. Adherents of traditional religion who are converted to Christianity or Islam still embrace the fundamentals of traditional religion because such principles are deeply embedded in their traditional values. Religious tolerance is one of these values, and for an African it would be a mistake to exchange that quality of tolerance for a fanatical adherence to an exclusivist religion. The objective for an African who adheres to another religion should fundamentally be to harmonize these diversities which can constitute the basis for the unity of humankind.

### **African Religion and Culture**

---

ATR has been coexisting with other religions, notably Christianity and Islam. It is true to say that traditional religious beliefs have persisted among Christianized and Islamized Africans. For many, the change from traditional religion to Christianity or Islam was so sudden that they had hardly time to reflect on what this meant for their daily lives. Consequently, many African Christians and Muslims retain traditional religious beliefs long after embracing their new-found faith.<sup>6</sup> There are innumerable examples that bear this out. The author recently sat on a pastoral committee which was discussing a charge of witchcraft directed at one of the local church leaders. Even though Christianity has existed in that area for over one hundred years, some members felt that witchcraft was still prevalent in the Christian community; hence the charge against the Christian leader.

It has been found that in most African communities Christians turn to some aspect of the traditional religion at some point in their lives. Good examples are weddings and funerals. According to my experience, Christians often celebrate two wedding ceremonies: the traditional rite is performed before or after the church ceremony. The latter looks like a mere appendage, which people may decide to do without. The traditional funeral rite is carried out before the Christian ceremony. In some instances, there have been conflicts when Christian church leaders tried to discourage people from performing the traditional rites and these therefore had to be done in secret. There need not be any conflicts where there is understanding of the interrelationship between the two religions.

The traditional African family institution which was seen as a socioreligious community of the living, the dead and those yet to be born was first to come into conflict with the "new" religions. Elders were greatly perturbed that their youngsters who were joining the new religions tended to be at loggerheads with the traditional religious norms. When-



*The Church and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism:  
A Historical and Contemporary Perspective*

ever some converts refused to participate in the traditional rites and rituals, it became clear that they were making a determined effort to depart from the accepted socioreligious norms. As a result, in some instances Christians compromised with the traditional religion and were threatened with excommunication from the church.

Many traditionally cherished ideals of family life have come into conflict with Christian practices. At the center of this controversy are the various forms of traditional marriage, especially the question of dowry and polygamy. Even today, the church in Africa has not resolved the whole issue of polygamy and leviratic marriages within the Christian community. A related problem is that of childlessness which has beset the African church. African communities, who have valued large families as status symbols and signs of divine blessing, have never come to terms with the church's stand on polygamy. It is high time that the African church resolves this matter in the spirit of African socialism and communalism.

Today, most traditionalists do not practice any religion, because society is in disarray. Christianity and Islam have had a negative influence on the traditional structures on which ATR is based. Traditional religion, which served as a basis for the whole community, has been weakened. A religion which requires a communal rather than an individual worship response cannot survive in a divided society. The threat posed by Christianity and Islam has made some adherents of traditional religion reflect on their beliefs. Many have joined one of the two religions, others have moved further away from traditional religion and have become agnostics or skeptics. Some of them even publicly announce their skepticism and indifference. What is needed is the revival of those traditional norms and communal beliefs which formerly kept the African community cohesive and vibrant. The church would be well inspired to adopt some of the traditional rites and rituals which are so meaningful for worship



and celebrations. The church, to become whole, will have to appropriate the African concept of life as a celebration.

It is interesting to observe that Islam has been fairly tolerant of some elements of traditional religion. Islam permits ancestor veneration and the practice of divination performed in the name of Allah. A good example of this is the Somali cult of the clan ancestors, which has become a cult of Muslim clan saints.<sup>7</sup> In the context of modern social and cultural change Islam played a unique role in that it has oriented African thought more towards certain universal concepts which were already present in the traditional religions. Such concepts include the idea of a supreme God and the notion of life hereafter. Far from being relinquished, many of the concepts encountered in tradition have found a new breeding ground in Islam and have been remolded along Islamic lines, whereas much of Islam was shaped along traditional lines. The result is a new system, open at both the transcendent and ritual levels.

The African Independent Churches have endeavored to indigenize Christianity mainly at the level of the ritual. Although some of the beliefs have also been incorporated within the church's teaching, it remains to be seen how Christian theology and doctrine will be developed. African Christianity has tended to take the cue from Western theology. A lot needs to be done to give form to an authentic African theology that will take as a point of departure African beliefs and practices.

## **Conclusion**

What we need in Africa is mutual appreciation of cultural values. Religions must take the risk of entering into the process of interfaith relationship recognizing the fact that we live in a multicultural world. It is our responsibility to expose ourselves to an open exchange of witness and experience, both with each other and with the forces of secularity.<sup>8</sup>

*The Church and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism:  
A Historical and Contemporary Perspective*

Defending our long-established positions cannot save us. The time has come when each religion must engage in critical self-appraisal to discover ways and means of how to serve the cause of truth. It is only through such openness that we can contribute our best to a new age where what humans have in common may develop steadily.

Christians in Africa will have to realize first and foremost that they, like people in other religions, are participating in the struggle for a common future. They not only must coexist with other spiritual forces but they have to work alongside others to build the structures of a peaceful community.

**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths* (Geneva: WCC 1985), p. 61.
- <sup>2</sup> Donald Dawe, in Anderson and Stransky, eds., *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: 1981), p. 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Stephen C. Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 17f.
- <sup>4</sup> *Problems and Promises of Africa: Towards and Beyond the Year 2000.* A summary of the proceedings of the symposium convened by the A.A.C.C. in Mombasa in November 1991 (Nairobi: AACC, 1993), p. 56.
- <sup>5</sup> David B. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Study of Churches and Religions in the Modern World, AD 1900-2000* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 782.
- <sup>6</sup> Emefie Ikenga Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion: A Case Study of the Igbo of Nigeria* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1981), p. 170.
- <sup>7</sup> Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1976), p. 186.
- <sup>8</sup> H.W. Gensichen, "World Community and World Religions," in J.S. Pobee, ed., *Religion in a Pluralistic Society* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), p. 35.

## THE CHALLENGE OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN AFRICA: CASE STUDIES

---

### West Africa, Nigeria

---

*David L. Windibiziri*

#### Introduction

In West Africa there are three major religions that have to be considered if we are going to outline the religious situation. The oldest of the three is African Traditional Religion (ATR). In spite of local differences, it is a complete entity. The emphasis is on the belief in a creator who has, it is thought, for various reasons withdrawn his immediate interest from his creation and is mostly acting through intermediaries such as spirits.

As early as the 8th century, Islam was spreading across the Sahara along the trade routes. For the first eleven centuries the pace of its expansion was slow, but during the 19th and the 20th centuries it began to gather speed. The early traders acted as missionaries; in the beginning, though, mainly the ruling classes and the people living in cities were adopting the Islamic faith. Ironically, it was to some considerable degree the result of Western colonialism which allowed Islam to expand faster during the past century. This was because the colonial masters considered their religion to be an expression of higher social, religious and cultural values.

About three hundred years ago, Roman Catholic monks and priests made the first attempts to bring Christianity to West Africa, but somehow they had no lasting influence. The great periods of evangelization took place in the last century and in this century when missionary efforts were



*The Challenge of Religious Pluralism in Africa:  
Case Studies*

considerable. The result was that in many areas the number of churches grew rapidly.

However, we have to realize that Christianity has divided into several streams which run alongside each other. We cannot really speak about exchange because there are two independent groups. There are the so-called traditional or mainstream churches on the one hand, and on the other the African Independent Churches, built around a visionary or prophetic leader, and the churches which broke away from the mainstream churches because of disagreements about issues such as church discipline, drinking, and polygamy.

Therefore the religious scene is like a garden full of flowers and weeds. It is difficult to analyze this situation as the facts are so complex and varied that they defy any such attempts. Nevertheless, we shall try to isolate a few trends.

### **The Relationship with Traditional Religion**

There never really existed a problem in the relationship between ATR and the two religions that came from outside Africa. Many people coming from a traditional background converted to Islam when, in search of work, they moved away from their village into the city. For instance, when the people from Guyuk, my home area, went to Jos on foot—a distance of about 500 kilometers—the only way they could get food was to eat with the Muslims in the villages on the way. The various ethnic or tribal groups did not have a basis for offering fellowship to others, but this need for obtaining food was one of the reasons for accepting Islam; if you did not perform the *sala*<sup>1</sup> prayers, you acted as an *arne*, an infidel. The acceptance might be very superficial, but all the same, it was there. This did not mean, however, that the traditional customs or ways of belief and thinking were relinquished.

Others became Muslims because this was a good way to pave their way to higher government or parastatal positions. This was especially so in the 1960s; even today, to some ex-

tent it is still a valid reason for some people to change religion.

There is a similar pattern for us Christian converts. Although we know that there are glimpses of light and truth in traditional religion, we now have come to the full light in Christ. Why should we fight or quarrel with our fathers? In most cases, we continue to live in good fellowship with them. Sometimes they object to us becoming Christians, for they are afraid that, if we do so, we become lazy and will no longer help the family with farming; but when they discover that we are still full of love and concern for them, there is no longer a problem in our relationship.

Many Muslims and Christians have kept a considerable part of their traditional heritage. There is a kind of folk-Islam that makes use of traditional medicine, amulets and so on, which is totally foreign to orthodox Islam. Many Christians are not really making a sharp separation between their traditional past and the practice of their Christian faith. When they fall ill, many still believe that *mayu*, witchcraft, is at work, and they wear amulets just to be on the safe side. They have one leg in the old tradition and one in the new faith, because they do not completely trust Christ's authority over evil powers.

In fact, reasons to leave traditional religion and to convert to Islam or to Christianity are manifold. They are not all based on religious conviction, but have much more to do with social aspects. For example, many feel that they will have a better life if they identify with the Muslim or the Christian community. In this way, a certain need to be known or to be recognized can be filled. For instance, children who register at schools will never admit that they are traditionalists, they will say that they are Christians or Muslims.

However, it is interesting to see that some of the educated people are going back to the traditional ways, supposedly because they feel that this is a way of maintaining their



Africanness as distinct from Western culture. But there seem to be two trends. One group consists of those who separate traditional customs from traditional rites. They are rejecting the religious and spiritual aspects of the old ways of living, but they wish to keep the customs, or the culture, as they say. They do not see any reason why this culture should be condemned.

Another group is reviving the traditional rites; they do this in secret, though. But when one hears of mutilated bodies being found or of people having disappeared, this is often put down to these groups who are performing the traditional rites to gain protection or material wealth. It is not easy to tackle this phenomenon because none of these groups will come out into the open. Nevertheless, it is part of our pluralistic situation.

Recently, a Christian chief died. Even though he had been an ordained pastor, there was no way the church could bury him, because all the circumstances surrounding his burial were deeply rooted in traditional religion. Nevertheless, these traditions seem to break down, for not all of the young people who are taking part in ceremonies know what tradition is. They are only imitating the outward manifestations of various customs; actually, the essence of traditional religion is secrecy. Nobody must know what is going on except the traditional functionaries. Now that these traditional rites are performed so openly—and that is one way to undermine them—they will also at some point be abandoned.

### **Relationships between Christians and Muslims**

The real challenge for today's West African society is the relationship between Christians and Muslims. It is extremely difficult to speak about West Africa as a whole because from country to country there are great variations. My remarks will therefore apply to Nigeria and specifically to Northern Nigeria, because the situation in the south is very different from that in the north. In Southern Nigeria there is much

more tolerance and acceptance of people's right to have their own religion and of the ways of practicing it.

It is in Northern Nigeria that we face the greatest challenges for solving the problems of our multireligious society.

When I turn back to my early years, the situation then was quite different from today. Within one and the same family, relationships were simple and straightforward. Some chose one faith and some another, but the family relationship did not suffer. At Christmas, Christians would take food to their Muslim friends and neighbors, and when the time for the *sala* celebration came, Muslims would bring food to their Christian friends. Nobody even questioned whether the animals eaten on these occasions had been slaughtered the right way. This question came up only in the 1960s, when various Islamic reform groups wanted to purify Islam from what they considered to be a pollution of their traditions.

The riots which took place in Nigeria after 1980 all happened in the northern part of the country. As far as I can remember, only one occurred in Ibadan; this was when Muslims erected a mosque close to a chapel and then decided that the cross (which had been there for four years!) was too close and tried to destroy it.

One of the reasons for the constant clashes is that religion is a strong weapon in the political struggle for power in Nigeria. The British had divided the country into three regions, of which the northern region was by far the most populous; hence, the northern Muslims have come to believe that they should have all the political power. Anything threatening their dominant role must be put out of the way. All these unprovoked and meaningless riots where lives are lost and property damaged have, unfortunately for the Muslims, contributed to unite the Christians. This makes it difficult to imagine that any plan of Islamization might succeed.

For example, in 1987, Sheik Abubakar Gumi stated in a provokingly controversial interview that he could not see any way how Muslims could live under a Christian leader. The consequence was that even stronger ties among the

## *The Challenge of Religious Pluralism in Africa: Case Studies*

Christians in Kaduna State developed and it was a Christian who was elected to chair the local government.

Several issues are causing tensions. One is the adoption of the *shari'a*, and another the membership in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). For the Muslims, these two issues are very important for their self-understanding; the Christians are against, these issues paving the way for turning Nigeria into an Islamic state.

When in 1986 it became known that the military government had secretly made Nigeria a member of the OIC, the Christians protested loudly because they felt this was against the secular nature of the nation as laid down in the Constitution, namely that the State should be neutral in questions of religion.

The *shari'a* law exists already in the whole of Northern Nigeria where it is applied in Muslims' civil cases. Conflicts arise when Christians are forced to submit to Islamic courts, for instance in divorce cases, and the Muslims object to not having a national Islamic Court of Appeals.

The demand for *shari'a* courts arises in more and more African countries. The BBC has reported some time ago that the Muslims in Ethiopia, who make up about 40 percent of the population, have demanded that the *shari'a* be instituted.

### **Conclusion**

The challenge for both groups is that they have to realize that Nigeria is and will continue to be a multireligious nation. Riots are no solution, for Christians will continue to exist here. They are citizens who have the same rights as Muslims.

The Christians have to learn that militancy is not the answer, because Muslims are here, and here to stay. There is no doubt that the Christians have saved Nigeria from total chaos; it is therefore important to continue educating the Christians, especially our young ones, and also the independent Pentecostals and those from the "mushroom" churches. We must teach them to show patience, concern and love for



our Muslim sisters and brothers. We all have to learn to accept that we must live together in tolerance and peaceful co-existence. There is no other way forward.

We have to find avenues to enable the two groups to talk together, to work together on common projects for the good of the whole nation, to study each other's religion without prejudice and with a sincere intention of trying to overcome mutual suspicion and deliberate misunderstanding of the other party's intentions. We have to get to the point where both sides accept that both parties have the same right to be in this country. In the present situation it may seem an extremely difficult task to reach this point, but that is the challenge ahead of us; we have to take it up trusting that God who created us all will also help us to accept one another as sisters and brothers in spite of all the differences we are struggling with.

This is also the reason why we, in the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria (LCCN), have been working on how to improve the relations between Christians and Muslims. After two local conferences for various church leaders, we invited both Christians and Muslims in November 1993 to the First International Conference on Christian-Muslim Mutual Relations.<sup>2</sup> Forty-four participants spent a week together and had very fruitful discussions on the issues that often cause problems in our daily lives. It was also unanimously agreed that we should work towards establishing a center to develop our fellowship even more.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> The word in classical Arabic is *salat*; in a number of colloquial usages it is pronounced *sala*. It is the ritual prayer five times a day, at the mosque or anywhere else, or the Friday noon prayer conducted solemnly at the mosque.

<sup>2</sup> A Second International Conference, as a follow-up on what had been achieved, took place in September 1995.



## Eritrea

---

*Asfaha Mehari*

After thirty years of a bloody war struggling for independence from Ethiopia, Eritrea is now a newly independent country situated in the Horn of Africa. It became independent in May 1993. Its surface is 125,000 square kilometers, its Red Sea coast is 1000 kilometers long. Asmara, the capital, lies on a plateau 2325 meters above sea level. The population is about 3.5 million, and Asmara has about 400,000 inhabitants. At present there are equal numbers of Christians and Muslims in Eritrea. The majority of Muslims live in the lowland areas of the country, which are sparsely populated, and the majority of Christians live in the more densely populated highlands.

Christianity came to Eritrea towards the middle of the 4th century and spread to many parts of the country. Islam entered the country at the beginning of the 7th century and also spread all over the country.

The adherents of these two faiths never waged war against each other to spread their faiths. They have always lived together in peace and good harmony. They fought together to liberate their country. They fought in order to live peacefully together as they had done at all times.

Some Muslims are saying that "Islam is not the name given to a personal or inner experience only, but it seeks to govern and direct the everyday life of individuals and of the entire human race." The part of this sentence which says "govern ... the entire human race," is far removed from the idea of Islam that Eritrean Muslims hold today. In Eritrea, Muslims and Christians are living together, as they have done for hundreds of years, as kinsmen/women, friends and neighbors.

In some areas one even encounters Muslims bearing Christian names, such as John (Yohannes), Gheremariam

(the servant of Mary), or Habtemariam (the richness of Mary). This indicates that their fathers were Christians.

I am stressing here the concepts of kinship, friendship and good neighborhood because of their significant role in our Christian-Muslim society. They are aspects of our daily life, and their role in a pluralistic society is therefore very important.

The Eritrean people like living together; when they die they want to be buried together, in the same place as their next of kin. They are together when a family member is getting married, when a relative is dying. Now, as ever, being together is very important for Eritreans. In this way, Christians and Muslims are living happily together, filled with mutual concern.

At present, many Eritreans exchange thoughts and opinions when they meet in everyday life, for instance in industrial surroundings, factories, schools, while engaging in sports. These encounters give them the opportunity to share their religious ideas and to make each other aware of the religious services and ceremonies taking place in their respective communities.

Historically and spiritually both Islam and Christianity are rooted in Judaism. When we compare the Qur'an with the Old Testament, many passages will grasp our attention and deserve to be studied.

In this paper, I would like to present two recent case studies about the relations between Muslims and Christians in Eritrea. The first is about a new Eritrean Orthodox church in a village by the name of Guakat in Akeleguzay province, about 50 kilometers north of Asmara. The construction of this church began in 1985 and was made possible through contributions from the village community. Some of the villagers living in the capital or in other towns also gave financial help.

The villagers elected a few people to collect money and building materials. This committee consisted of four men, one of whom was a dedicated and very educated Muslim. He

*The Challenge of Religious Pluralism in Africa:  
Case Studies*

had volunteered to support the people of his home village to build their church. He and his Muslim brothers living in the village all helped. They also, together with Christian friends, raised the necessary funds. On 25 February 1994, they asked the Evangelical Church of Eritrea (ECE) for support. The ECE gave them the amount necessary to finish the church. It is now called the Trinity Church of Guakat.

How could such a thing happen? How was it possible that these people agreed to erect this church together, in spite of their different faiths? Here again, it is their concept of how to practice kinship, friendship and good neighborhood which made them cooperate in building this church. In the Old Testament, Abraham said to the oldest of his servants, the one who was in charge of all that he owned, "put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the Lord the God of heaven and of earth that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but will go to my country and my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac" (Gen. 24:2-4).

In this village, both Christians and Muslims stood together in order to build a new church, hoping that this would bring them closer still in love and peace. This church is not only a place of worship but a place of reconciliation. Muslims and Christians need forgiveness and reconciliation.

Being involved daily in actions of forgiveness and reconciliation is support for the villagers' everyday life. Working together, they are achieving their goals. Such activities must be encouraged for the sake of love and peaceful coexistence.

There is another good example I would like to present here, one I read about in a local newspaper.<sup>1</sup> The story was about a Christian woman, Mrs Leul Embaye, aged 65, and a Muslim man, Mr Umar Mahmud, whose age, from the accompanying photograph, could be guessed at about 70. Mrs Embaye had lost her three sons in the Eritrean struggle for liberation. Her husband, Mr Ghide Kahssay, had died in a car accident in Asmara shortly before. He had been on the way



to collect his pension money when he was hit by a truck carrying water. The driver was Mr Mahmud. Although Mr Mahmud had a very small income, he decided to pay about US\$3,000 as blood money to Mr Kahssay's family, on top of what the insurance company was paying. Mrs Embaye refused his offer. She said that friendship and love are worth more than money. And the newspaper published this saying: "Love is better than money." And I wish to say this here: Such love, particularly among people of different faiths, is unique. Love among people who live in a pluralistic society is very needed!

It is love and concern for one another which are at the root of what I related above. This love is based on kinship, good neighborhood and friendship. In fact, a new friendship was established between Mr Mahmud's and Mrs Embaye's families. Religion in a pluralistic society must play its God-given role by using the existing socio-cultural systems of kinship, friendship and good neighborhood so as to promote human dignity and human rights, and to encourage worship.

#### *Note*

- <sup>1</sup> *New Eritrea* (Tigrinya), No. 17, October 29, 1994





## THE CHALLENGE OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

---

### A Contribution from the European Experience

*Kajsa Ahlstrand*

Europe and religious pluralism: How are these two concepts related to each other? Is pluralism a cherished value in the European discourse? Are the two concepts incompatible? My thesis is that Europe, as a Christian continent, has built its identity on a rejection of racial and religious pluralism. European history can be read as one of expelling "foreign bodies," the black and the heathen. Europe must come to terms with the fact that, in a global context, the majority of the earth's inhabitants are neither white nor Christian. For continental Europeans, as well as for those from islands and peninsulas, this will be one of the most difficult lessons to be learnt.

It has repeatedly been said that Europe is not a monolithic entity, culturally, ethnically or religiously. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern some common elements in European history which can be negatively formulated as hatred or fear of the black and the heathen ("heathen" here meaning all non-Christians, including Jews and Muslims).

To make my point, let me take two events from European history: What made the Germanic-speaking tribes north of the Alps identify with the Romance-speaking Mediterranean tribes? When were these diverse ethnic groups first regarded as belonging to the same people—the Europeans? The first time we find the expression "Europeans" is in a mid-8th century chronicle which describes the Battle of Poitiers. The Arabian warlord Abd ar-rahman was then defeated in Gallia by Charles Martel, whose army was made up of people from

*The Challenge of Religious Pluralism  
in a Global Context*

different Gallo-Roman and Germanic tribes. The only time these *europenses* were united was on the battlefield. The battle over, they returned to their homes and their fellowship was dissolved.

Europeans were called that when they protected their borders against religiously foreign bodies. At that time, "foreigners" were met with distrust at best, but it was religion that was the more important distinguishing factor, not race.

It was certainly arrogant to regard people as barbarians, who did not share the language and customs of the ruling elite. The descriptions of the peoples living outside or on the borders of what was seen as "the civilized world" given by those in the center bear witness to this. The North, the East and the South were thought to be populated by strange creatures who were not fully human, according to European standards.

Before the rise of Islam, the Mediterranean Sea did not act as a divide between Europe, Africa and Asia, on the contrary, it was a uniting element for the countries around it. Today still we speak of the Mediterranean culture as distinct from the cultures north, south and east of it. In Verona, in northern Italy, there is a cathedral dedicated to St Zeno, a 5th-century bishop from Mauritania, who is always depicted as being black. The Church Fathers and the medieval theologians saw human beings as "man" in the abstract, particularities such as age, language, status or color were not important. It can be debated to what extent gender was seen as a significant category of the human being in the abstract. In some respects it was not seen as such, for example in the theology of baptism and in the notion of sanctity. Only human beings can be baptized, but both women and men can be baptized. Only human beings can become saints, but both women and men can become saints. If a being was defined as human, that being, irrespective of gender, age, color, language, mental and physical abilities, status or origin could be baptized and, at least potentially, reach sainthood. In Christian Europe there were terrible forms of oppression and in-

justice—slavery, corporeal punishment, inequality, appalling conditions for the poor, etc.—but in spite of that, human beings were regarded, at least according to Christian doctrine, as sharing in a common human nature which existed in the mind of God. In the medieval hierarchical world view, “man” was one and indivisible, created by God in his image and likeness, placed by God above animals and beneath the angels. As long as “human” was seen as a singular rather than as a plural, no fundamental differences between human beings could be perceived. The problem of pluralism did not exist until the idea of “man” as a universal being was shattered.

William of Occam challenged the prevailing view that universals preceded particulars. He denied that universals had existence except as words and terms. There was no “man” in the abstract, only a multitude of human beings. But Occam was a Christian who trusted the revelation in the Scriptures where it is stated that human beings are created in God’s image and that through baptism there are neither Jews nor Greeks. Occam cannot be blamed for later exigences.

In 1676, another William, William Petty, wrote *The Scale of Creatures*, where he claimed that Europeans differ from Africans not only by the color of their skin, but by the inner properties of their brains. He saw human beings not only as belonging to different tribes or nations, but to different biological species. When this work was published, it did not draw great attention. It was not until the end of the 18th century, when the European expansion was beginning to gather speed that the thought of a hierarchy of races gained official recognition.

Thus begins the history of European racism, culminating in the exclamation “exterminate all the brutes,” a quotation from the very European, Polish-born, French-speaking, English writer Joseph Conrad. As the Swedish author Sven Lindquist has shown, this statement was not an isolated proclamation by a fictitious person, but lay at the heart of modern European history and civilization. Those who challenged



*The Challenge of Religious Pluralism  
in a Global Context*

this view were often regarded as obscurantist and reactionary, deluded by effeminate Christian sentimentalism. Many Christians adopted the modern scientific discourse of racial superiority and racial inferiority. They could then defend colonialism not only as a way to spread the gospel and to convert heathens, but also on modern "scientific" grounds: it was right that those who belonged to a superior race should rule over those of an inferior race. In the 19th century, we find in many European societies the devastating combination of Christian arrogance towards other religions and the notion of white racial superiority. There were those who were racists without being Christians, and those who abhorred heathen religions without being racists, but when the two attitudes combined, as they did in the 19th and 20th centuries, the effect for non-European peoples was disastrous.

The fact that human skin can be differently pigmented and human societies and cultures can exist in many different forms led, together with the European inability to deal with pluralism, to conscious and well-planned attempts to annihilate all those who did not conform to the European standard of what a human being should be.

There were protests, even from Europeans, against the project to "exterminate all the brutes." Many of the protesters were Christians, not a few were missionaries, who still believed that all human beings, no matter how strange they looked or behaved, were created in the image of God and had a right to hear the gospel and be baptized into Christ. But for European Christians it was just as difficult to deal with pluralism as for "enlightened" people.

The Christian Europe of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance was also party to torturing and killing people. Not that the victims were thought to be racially inferior, no, they were thought to belong to an inferior or even demonic creed. When the "pagan" nations in Europe became Christianized, there remained groups of people who refused to receive baptism as the sign of God's acceptance of all human

beings, who did not wish to be "raised to the altars" through the grace of God as a sign of human perfection. And so people were tortured and killed, again and again. Christian Europe could not accept religious pluralism, and showed this inability in its attempts to rid Europe of its Jews through violence, coercion and expulsion.

The Muslims were held at bay east of the Bosphorus (until the traumatic event of the siege of Constantinople in 1453); the Jews were isolated by restrictions when they were not forced to choose between baptism and death or expulsion; the European pagans were converted; Buddhists and Hindus were unknown; only those Christians who followed different calendars and liturgies were left and had to be fought in order to achieve the goal of a homogeneous Christian Europe.

As an exercise in religious pluralism, the European example can only be a deterring one. No religion has been as unwilling to tolerate religious pluralism as European Christianity. The exceptions to the rule of a homogeneous Christianity have been few and scattered. It looks as if Christianity can accept religious pluralism only when it is in minority. And then religious pluralism is only second best, the ideal still being Christian hegemony. This was the view of the Reformers, and, until recently, of most of the missionaries as well.

But something has changed. We now do speak of religious pluralism, even as Christians, even in Europe. It is not considered a threat, not yet an enrichment, but a challenge. Is it possible that Christians who have denounced the evils of racial hegemony, will also be able to denounce the evils of religious hegemony and celebrate the riches of religious pluralism? What will happen to the church, to Christ, to God, if Christians accept that there are many religions in the world, most of which are not likely to vanish in a foreseeable future?

European Christianity is not threatened by the existence of other religions in Europe. Whatever Islam and Hinduism

*The Challenge of Religious Pluralism  
in a Global Context*

may appear to be in other parts of the world, in Europe they are minority religions whose adherents often belong to the lowest strata of European societies, disadvantaged as they are by lack of language skills, foreign appearance, nationality. Today, when power and status belong to them, the question for the European churches is how they should act towards and reflect on other religions.

The majority of non-Christians do not look like Europeans. The Muslims (with the exception of the Bosnians, the great majority of whom are non-practicing) have come to Europe from Asia and Africa. They are distrusted, if not outright discriminated against, by the majority society which is both racist and suspicious of "foreign" religions. To complicate things further, the educated middle classes seldom admit that they have succumbed to racism or religious bigotry. These two elements have amalgamated into the socially acceptable notion of "multiculturalism." In the multiculturalist discourse ethnic or religious groups are seen as possessing certain rights which in modern Western legal systems have belonged only to individuals. When ethnic or religious groups are seen as monolithic entities, "given" certain rights and duties by majority white Christian society, the notion of "separate development" lurks in the background. The appointed leaders of the ethnic and religious groups are regarded by majority society as representatives of every single member of the group, a situation which can be intolerable for those members of the group who oppose the leaders. As "Women Against Fundamentalism" in Britain have shown, it is women who are suffering most from the multiculturalist policy.

If religion is reduced to culture, and if culture is thought to be intrinsically bound to the country of origin and thus to the color of hair and skin, then it is not possible for religious and ethnic groups to interact, and there is no hope for exchange and mutual enrichment. Multiculturalism is thus not a viable solution to racism and religious intolerance in Europe. Multiculturalism, as it has come to be understood,



is incompatible with religious pluralism, if pluralism means that religious traditions can enrich each other.

## **A Contribution from the Asian Experience**

*Prasanna Kumari*

### **Introduction**

I appreciate the opportunity to share my Indian experience in the context of Asian religious pluralism with my friends in Africa as they examine religious pluralism in Africa and the challenges and responses to it. Asia having been the birth-place of all major world religions, i.e., Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam—and harboring almost all races of the world, with about three-fifths of the world's population, has been a colossus of religious fervor over centuries, both before and after Christ. It is no easy task to analyze the historical and modern implications for an erudite readership. However, let me attempt to do so.

### **Pluralism in Asia**

The quest for religious truth is the foundation of Asian religions, cultures and civilizations. Basically, in Asian societies the parameters of the quest for truth, which began in prehistoric civilizations, still continue to dominate the religious and cultural values and lives of the people. Western liberation, industrial civilization, urbanization, modern technology, market economy, and political democratic values may have made deep inroads into the value system of the Asian, yet they have not been deep enough to swap the ancient system of life for the modern values of life.

In ancient times, there existed in Asia wide interaction of religious values and even hectic missionary activity from



*The Challenge of Religious Pluralism  
in a Global Context*

one country to another. At the same time, the spread of Buddhism in Asia disseminated its religious, cultural and social values. It looks as though the ancient religious and the modern values were almost continually challenging each other. But modernism has not been able to eradicate the old values from the lives of the people. It is in this context that we should have a quick look at the Asian religions.

**Hinduism** is not one religious system like Christianity or Islam. Hinduism is only a geographical term for a variety of religious thoughts and experiences in the region of the Indus valley, which has spread to India with time. The Indus Valley Civilization, one of the three oldest in the world (the others being the Mesopotamian and the Egyptian), had in prehistoric times, about BC 2500, a religious life and gods to worship—one of them, Siva, still continues to be part of the Hindu pantheon today. In that region of Asia which is India today many thinkers, saints and seekers of truth spread religious values, customs and traditions that are still alive today.

**Buddhism.** In ancient times, before Christ, abuse of power through religion gives evidence of religion being institutionalized under the priests; this led to its corruption and ritualization.

About BC 500, as a protest movement against Hindu religious corruption, Siddharta Gautama, known as Buddha, led a religious reformation movement; non-violence was its central characteristic. After a victorious battle, King Ashoka embraced Buddhism and repented of the killings and the bloodshed. Thereafter, he became a missionary king, spreading peace and the new religion in the whole of Asia.

Subsequently, other forms of Buddhism emerged, as well as Confucianism, Taoism, Chinese Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam.

**Christianity and Islam** being active missionary religions, spread to several Asian countries. The conquering armies of the ancient Spanish kingdom brought along the Christian religion. Later, the British colonizers also contributed to the spread of Christianity in Asia. European and

American missionaries, in pioneering missionary enterprises, established churches all over Asia.

Islam spread to India and Southeast Asia, and has even become the state religion in Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Thus, Judaism, Christianity and Islam could be seen as Asian religions—they were aggressively active in spreading their religion among the peoples of Asia, although Judaism has been aggressive merely to reassert its supremacy in its own region.

### **The Challenges to the Asian Religions**

There have been some challenges common to all religions in Asia.

#### **Secularism**

Modernization brought about by contacts with the West has exposed the religions in Asia to new influences, especially secularism. Industrialization, urbanization, changed lifestyles (such as Western lifestyles), modern technology and the market economy are powerful forces which challenge all religions in Asia. There is no doubt that secularism has made deep inroads into the religious values.

#### **Democracy**

The Western political system came to be introduced in almost all societies of Asia, and the values that attached to this system, especially freedom, equality and socialism, captured the imagination of the people. Political parties spread this new message. Consequently the religious authority was challenged by a new political authority—whatever the values of religions, they were in conflict with the political authority. Religious influence was confined to personal life, and separation of state and religion (like church and state in Europe) was also taking root.

## *The Challenge of Religious Pluralism in a Global Context*

The Chinese form of Communism held sway over China under Chairman Mao, but today we see a gradual opening of the Chinese society to market economy and ultimately to democracy, perhaps.

### **Urbanization**

Urbanization is a powerful force which is ushering in a new, Western civilization that is in contrast to the ancient civilization based on religion.

### **Market economy**

Hinduism is basically a religious, cultural, economic and political system. That is why it has survived for ages, all dimensions of human life—temporal and spiritual—being tied together. Even today, it is hard to untie the knot. In this system the most powerful influence for change is the emergence of the market—in which anyone can participate without reference to religion and caste. This has brought about a wave of change in the religious values of the Hindus.

### **The Influence of Modernism on Asian Religions**

The influence of modernism on Asian religions has not been deep. Religious and cultural values are deeply embedded in the life and lifestyles of the people. One classic example is Japan:

Japan is one of the world's richest countries. The USA comes only second after Japan. The Japanese have shown enormous skills and sensitivity to absorb modern technology—outdoing many of the world's countries. They have been playing the global market most successfully and thus have amassed great wealth. But their own consumption of the goods they are so efficiently producing and skillfully selling has been low.



Some figures show their religious loyalties. A population of 100 million registers 120 million religious adherents. At least 20 million profess more than one religion—there is one 120 percent religious loyalty.

It was only after the Second World War, under deliberate American influence, that the Japanese took to a bit of consumerism. They produced more and consumed less thus creating a huge marketable surplus; modern technology as well as the success of the market economy did not sweep away their ancient cultural and religious values and ways of life—as has happened unfortunately in Europe and America.

The same is true for India. It is said of an Indian scientist, a member of a scientific team sent to Japan to observe a rare solar eclipse, that on the day of the eclipse he applied for leave to take a dip in the sea to wash away his sins! Science is only a profession. Religion is the ultimate way of life!

### **Resurgence of Religious Fundamentalism**

You have all heard about the destruction by a frenzied mob of the 400-year old mosque Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992—a carefully planned destruction and executed according to plan by the most sophisticated of educated Hindus!

India today is grappling with this fundamentalism—which is the gateway to political power of rightist Hindus. The fundamentalist Hindus are getting rather close to political control of the country.

Islamic fundamentalism has become a great political force strengthened by the oil wealth of Islamic countries; it spells but death and destruction among nations.

### **Fundamentalism as a Threat to Social and Religious Harmony**

Communal peace and harmony are seriously threatening the peace of those societies where one religion seeks supremacy over the other. This is not new to Christianity. Christian



fundamentalism has had its day both through emperors and private missionary activities.

### **Religion and Society**

Religion must serve the concerns of society, namely peace and well-being for the people. It must become a tool for promoting human progress and development. Religion can become a powerful instrument for social change. Not many religions have adopted this role. Even Christianity is still debating its role—is it salvation tomorrow or already today?

The world was thrilled to see South Africa freed from the stranglehold of apartheid, a system based on Christianity; however, everyone knew that religion was used for racist domination. And indeed, it is Christianity that the white minority used to impose an exploitative, racist system on the black majority. This was also the motivation for the blacks as well as for the rest of the world to get rid of the racist grip of apartheid. Thus, religion in Asia or Africa can destroy or build society.

A society without the time-honored religious or spiritual values cannot last long. Therefore religious values are an essential foundation for a just society. These values must be properly defined and identified. For, if fundamentalism is a religious value, then society is divided and religion becomes a force of destruction. If religion promotes peace, justice and care of creation, then those of us who have gathered in the name of Christianity, have their role cut out to bring justice and harmony to Africa and Asia.

### **How Does Christianity Respond to Pluralism of Religions?**

A Hindu in India will wonder how Christianity, which emerged 2000 years ago, can condemn all religions which existed before the advent of Christ! This is something to be quite seriously pondered in a spirit of truth and humility.

The so-called primal religions have values which by far surpass those of the sophisticated religions. The values of the so-called primal religions are not only theory but they are part and parcel of daily social life; this shows, for instance, in the quality of life, the collective social security, in the concern for one another, in the protection of and care for the environment, in sharing of resources, in the responsibility for extended families—the primal religion is *par excellence* a religious, socio-economic security system! Thus, the claim that Christianity has spread civilization over the world is not kindly taken in the non-Christian world.

In the circles of sophisticated non-Christian religions Christ is accepted, but not the whole package that comes with Christianity, such as baptism and the structures of church organization. To us Christians it is the universality of Christ that is most important, more so than Christ as Redeemer. A reappraisal of 19th-century missiology is very necessary for us Christians so as to make our faith relevant to the context of today.

Christianity has proclaimed the gospel for humankind—salvation both today and tomorrow. Christianity has taken this message to the ends of the earth—in a proper focus; liberty and equality have been accepted as birth rights of all human beings in the world. Of course, new forms of slavery emerge from time to time—political, economic and cultural—and we have always the more powerful and less powerful—the strong and the weak. Therefore the gospel has to be proclaimed, but it is also necessary to strengthen truth wherever it is: in any religion. That would enable Christianity to shine even brighter. The search for truth in love is true religion. As St Paul says, faith, hope and love are the cornerstones of our lives, and love is the greatest of them. Love—true love—will overcome our ignorance, arrogance and prejudice and usher us into a heaven on earth.



## INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND THE WITNESS OF THE CHURCH IN THE MULTIFAITH CONTEXT OF AFRICA

---

*Emmanuel O. Oyelade*

### Interfaith Dialogue

---

I intend in this discussion to limit myself to Africa south of the Sahara, i.e., Black Africa. This is because it is in this region that the adherents of the three religions—traditionalists, Muslims and Christians—live together and face common plights such as famine, diseases, poverty, war, political and economic struggles. In this region, people of various religious ideologies find themselves together by divine design. According to Old-Testament writers, God continues the ordering of human experiences with the ultimate end that his will be fulfilled. Whatever the problems are, the communities must find solutions that will enhance their “belongingness” and their aspirations within God’s will. Haafkens illustrates our belonging together as human beings by describing sculptures called *Ujamaa* (community) that Tanzanian artists carve. “The sculpture, in the shape of a trunk of tree, consists of a great number of human beings holding each other. They are all different but form together this trunk.”<sup>1</sup> Africa south of the Sahara has been experiencing two types of interreligious dialogue, namely, informal and formal dialogue.

(a) **Informal dialogue** has existed and continues to exist within the extended family and the extended community. In the African traditional view, blood relationships cannot be broken by accepting external factors—such as a new religion, a new sociopolitical status or material possessions. Akinjogbin observes that this type of belonging together was not imposed by force of arms, but because it is commonly



*Interfaith Dialogue and the Witness of the Church  
in the Multifaith Context of Africa*

accepted that one is related by blood. In fact, no one who is not a blood relation can be a part of the community, and anyone related by blood cannot choose to opt out.<sup>2</sup> This unity in the traditional milieu is strengthened by the ancestors' spirit who unites their children into extended families and serves as the basis of ethnic and tribal solidarity.<sup>3</sup> This spirit of belonging to a group, this group feeling, just as in Ibn Khaldun's *Assabiyya*,<sup>4</sup> provides openness, mutual respect and cooperation, even in religious matters. This is especially true for the Yoruba of Western Nigeria.

Many issues demanding cooperation, contribution and active participation are therefore informally resolved within the extended families. In the extended community, the king as the representative of the divinities invites all religious adherents to assist him in solving the problems confronting the community. Let me illustrate this by describing an incident that happened during the reign of King Oyekan of Lagos (1885-1900). At one time, there were heavy rainfalls and in the ensuing flood many children drowned, buildings collapsed and property was lost. The king invited the religious leaders to confer on how to make the flood abate. The traditionalists offered various sacrifices, the Muslims and the Christians offered special prayers, and the rains stopped and the flood subsided.<sup>5</sup>

During my lecture tour of theological institutions in Eastern Africa in 1991 (in Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, and Uganda), I had confirmation that this informal dialogue is still a very active phenomenon. Presidents, kings and chiefs continue to discuss issues that are of common interest to their communities. Interfaith assistance is sought and cooperation is given to resolve pressing problems.

(b) **Formal dialogue.** In recent years, dialogue meetings have frequently been held in this region—sub-Saharan Africa. They were organized and sponsored, among other committed groups, by the Project for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCURA), the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). These

conferences were well organized; Christians and Muslims were brought together to discuss matters of common interest. Let me cite some recent engagements for the purpose of recognition and appreciation. In 1986, the WCC organized a five-days colloquium in Porto Novo, Benin, during which some thirty West Africans met to discuss issues of concern to the church.<sup>6</sup> In September 1989, another consultation was held at the University of Malawi, Zomba, sponsored and organized by the LWF and the WCC, with the theme "Encounter of Religions in Africa." The editors of the publication that came out of it expressed their joy in these words:

It was an ecumenical experience. For three institutions to collaborate was a salutary ecumenical experience. To have persons of other faiths at it was a healthy ecumenical experience. We all were enriched, and new relationships were forged for which we are most grateful.<sup>7</sup>

Another impressive and rewarding colloquium was organized in December 1989 in Tanzania. Twenty-three African Christians and Muslims from nine different countries gathered for one week at the Danish Volunteer Training Centre at Usa River. They all enthusiastically discussed three sub-themes: religion and education; religion and the state; religion and the family. This meeting was sponsored by the WCC's Unit of Dialogue with People of Living Faiths.<sup>8</sup>

From December 4 - 8, 1989, the Council for World Religions sponsored a multifaith conference with the theme "Religion and Peace in Multifaith Nigeria," at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. The conference brought together leading scholars, religious and community leaders, members of the press and students representing various religions. The discussions centered around five sub-themes: religion, politics and peace; religion, economic crisis and peace; religious values, social justice and peace; reli-

*Interfaith Dialogue and the Witness of the Church  
in the Multifaith Context of Africa*

gion and the law. The papers presented were indeed very stimulating and they helped participants to respect each other and love started to take roots in the hearts of all.<sup>9</sup>

More recently, 2-6 November 1993, the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria (LCCN) convened an international conference<sup>10</sup> at Miango, Jos, on Christian-Muslim mutual relations in Nigeria. The conference brought together participants, both Christian and Muslim, to discuss political issues. Several papers were presented, for instance, the relation between religion and politics in Nigeria. The bases of national peace and unity were also identified, namely, tolerance, love, and cooperation. Dialogue is the medium by which these objectives can be achieved.

I have taken pains to show that interest in dialogue is increasing in Africa. African churches of the sub-Saharan region appreciate these positive gestures to increase religious understanding, tolerance and cooperation among all religious groups—especially between Muslims and Christians. Among some of the problems identified by the papers presented at these conferences are for example the religious antagonism that often generates conflicts and violence,<sup>11</sup> religious competition which often results in religious intolerance and fanaticism,<sup>12</sup> politicization of religion to secure political power,<sup>13</sup> and religious fundamentalism which seeks to impose a religion on others through the medium of government.<sup>14</sup>

An in-depth study of the reports of these conferences shows that dialogue has been a very effective piece of machinery for promoting peace and development in Africa. During these conferences religious men and women enjoyed fellowship, worship and friendship. They did not see themselves in two military camps on the battlefield struggling to defeat the other. Misunderstandings and insecurity were removed. The participants, as ambassadors, returned to their religious communities with reports of goodwill.



### **The Witness of the Church**

---

But what is the nature of the witness of the church within this pluralistic context? For, in the view of the African churches in the region under consideration, to limit dialogue to sociopolitical activities can only be a lesser side of the church's mission. The bigger aspiration is how to fulfill God's will through the *witness* of the church. The churches also see their tasks in enabling people to get reconciled with God and their fellow human beings. Both these aspects require the witness of the church.

In the African church context, witnessing is not a process of confronting the community with a "do or die" choice. Rather, it is an advertisement of what God is doing in the midst of his people and what the church should be doing in honor of their Lord and Master, who, through humility, "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."<sup>15</sup> The word "witness" is therefore the central task of church mission. In this mission, the church, through the direction of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of the Scriptures, is also commissioned to advertise what God plans to do with his obedient and disobedient servants.<sup>16</sup> As Clinton Bennet rightly said, "Mission, I believe, is sharing God's love, with individuals, with communities, with institutions, in short with the whole family of humankind and beyond, taking on board the WCC's call for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation—to the whole created order, to the 'cosmos' for which the Christ of John 3:16 died."<sup>17</sup> Bennet also included in his idea of mission the word "diakonia" or service which includes the many service activities historically associated with Christian mission—in hospitals, schools, development and aid programs.<sup>18</sup> It is, however, sad to note that some of these traditional services of witness through mission, though persistent in some countries, are presently regarded by some nationalists as "adversaries" of the African self-reliance effort; they see these activities as remnants of colonialism.<sup>19</sup> Muslim fundamentalists criticized



*Interfaith Dialogue and the Witness of the Church  
in the Multifaith Context of Africa*

the "conversion obsession" of the promoters of these establishments. In several countries, the result is the rise of anti-missionary movements forcing governments to "take over" these establishments and limit the admission of foreign missionaries.

This notwithstanding, the church is commissioned to witness—a task that must be done! But what is the nature and scope of this witness? I like to use the word "defense" as an advertisement or witness model, in respect of God's acts in history and the church's faith commitments. But this defense is an objective demonstration of the church's involvements in the affairs of the society where it is established. The impetus for this defense is however not "self-interest," as the task of the lawyer is, it is "self-giving," because of our love for the people and our gratitude for God's outpouring of the Holy Spirit who sustains and enriches the church.

It is important to remember that the "self-giving" activities of Christian witness are rooted in the fact that the church itself is a witness of the divine intervention in human history. This intervention is demonstrated by the realities of the cross,<sup>20</sup> the Resurrection,<sup>21</sup> and the Christians' faith commitment to the commands of their Lord.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the church is also a witness to the activities of the Holy Spirit who is moving all things to the end of God's will at the "end-time." This is based on the Christian world-view "that the kingdom of God has already come in Jesus' life and is busy coming through the work of the Holy Spirit, and *will* come in its fullness at Christ's second coming."<sup>23</sup>

Now we may turn our attention to the church's task of witnessing by using the word "defense" as an advertising model. The methodology is dialogue. The objective is the transformation of African societies into centers of God's operations. In this context, any "conversion" which takes place is not the result of the church's task, rather it is a fulfillment of Christ's promise to draw all people unto himself and the moving power of the Holy Spirit to bring the history of salvation to the glory of God.<sup>24</sup> From Acts 16:14, we learn that

only God can open the hearts of people to the gospel. Reading through several texts of the New Testament (e.g., 2 Peter 3:13; Eph. 1:9-10; and 1 Cor. 15:28), one is convinced that the central task of the church is to work as partner with the Holy Spirit to fulfill God's promises.

The church as a witness is urgently called upon to defend the following:

**(1) Defense of the love of God for all humankind.**

It is the task of the church to place before the societies the fact that God loves the human race despite the overwhelming manifestation of people's hatred of their fellow beings. But God's love is demonstrated not only through his providential care as understood by some religions but also through the unmerited gift of his son for the remission of our sins and the attainment of eternal salvation.<sup>25</sup> In this task, conferences on the nature of mission and evangelism with a variety of sub-themes may be organized. The point of dialogue is to identify the implications that operating this defense may have for the various denominations. The ultimate goal is to reach some consensus on the various issues which the conference or consultation has identified. The proclamation strategies for the conclusions agreed upon are proposed at the consultation. Through these, the church then transmits the message of God's love to the societies in which they are established and beyond.

**(2) Defense of the sanctity of human life.**

In recent years, Africa has been going through periods of severe crisis. Apart from the age-old ravages of poverty, hunger and disease, human lives have been destroyed by drives for political power

*Interfaith Dialogue and the Witness of the Church  
in the Multifaith Context of Africa*

resulting in civil war,<sup>26</sup> by religious fundamentalism giving rise to conflict and violence, or by the unsatisfied thirst for material possessions bringing forth secret societies, armed robbers and assassins at an alarming rate.

The relevant question is: What is the nature of the church's witness in this context? The answer is simple, the church cannot be indifferent to human suffering. The spiritual development of any society must be associated with the welfare of this society. There are two dimensions to the church's task. Firstly, the church should discover how best to educate its members about the "biblical" views of "humankind in the image of God," "humankind in God's purpose" and humankind as part of the sanctity of all creation. Secondly, the church should provide welfare services in times of crisis. "The identification of genuine needs and design of solutions that fit into local cultural ecology"<sup>27</sup> and human experiences should be the task for dialogue. In this regard, the church will not just be idealizing the sanctity of human life, it will ensure that sanctity is demonstrated through operation of relief programs, reconciliatory activities, rehabilitation of displaced persons and reconstruction of the disintegrated communities.

**(3) Defense of the freedom of conscience.**

In all national constitutions in Black Africa, except in the Sudan, there is a provision to ensure religious freedom for all citizens. Individuals are free to practice their religious faith in public; they are free to relinquish it and adopt another faith.<sup>28</sup> But this freedom is always threatened by religious extremists and fanatics who use every means at their disposal to force others into believing what they



believe, or to make them pay heavily if they refuse to do so; this happens even in the Christian churches. Conferences and consultations should be convened to discuss the nature and scope of religious freedom in the African pluralistic contexts. These consultations should produce a full description of what religious freedom means in the daily life of the people, and also how the ideals of religious freedom could be laid down in the constitutions of all nations.<sup>29</sup> It is the task of the church to become involved in the process for achieving this end. In addition, the church must be sufficiently courageous to condemn publicly religious injustice and all attempts to impose a religion on the nation.

**(4) Defense of the ideals of truth and justice.**

From the experiences of the world of his time, the author of the Book of Proverbs found that truth and justice are the two inseparable principles for ensuring peace, unity and prosperity in all nations. In this view, truth exalts a nation but falsehood is its woe. "When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan."<sup>30</sup> When this is placed within the context of interfaith experiences in Africa, is it really true that most African leaders are sincere in their quest for self-reliance, unity and development, the three sociopolitical catchwords in Africa? In most war-torn countries, observers have found hidden tensions aroused by self-interests, ethnic or tribal interests, and religious competition. Religion is the basis of truth, but fraudulent intentions are at the root of sociopolitical and economic operations.



*Interfaith Dialogue and the Witness of the Church  
in the Multifaith Context of Africa*

The effect of insincerity and dishonesty among African functionaries is injustice, which percolates from the top to the bottom. The extent of the atrocities committed in the name of religion or for power and money cannot easily be estimated. According to observers, "the war in Sudan has been accompanied by the most horrific human rights violations centering on rape, looting, kidnapping, fortune and massacre."<sup>31</sup> Similar observations have been made about all the countries in conflict, and situations have not substantially improved.

What then is the church's witness or defense in this context? The church must always speak out in favor of justice or fair play. Injustice and falsehood should be denounced for the sake of love and reconciliation. To do this, dialogue conferences and consultations should regularly be convened, to which government officials, leaders in private sectors, religious leaders, both Christians and Muslims are to be invited. The problems of national integrity, of peaceful coexistence and joint development should be tackled. History has shown that the church "in witness" has been an unparalleled conscience of nations. This is how it has to be in Africa, even today.

**(5) The defense of the dignity of labor.**

From biblical evidence we know that work or labor is the "taproot" of human survival. The Bible shows that Jesus Christ prized work and enjoined his disciples to do the same.<sup>32</sup> The expansion of God's kingdom can fully materialize when Christians work persistently in God's vineyard. Right from the Fall, God was working hard towards the human being's redemption and abundance in life. That task was continued and consummated by

Jesus Christ who placed this "*continuum* model" into the hands of his followers. It is in this context, at least from a Christian ethical point of view, that in the kingdom of God and in the kingdoms of this world, human beings' self-realization can best be achieved through commitment to work.

In fact, every African nation seeks self-realization, happiness and progress. Most Africans want to achieve these goals, though not through hard work. For instance, from many African people it is common to hear such words as, "I worked in heaven before birth, I am here only to get my reward," or "You do not work for government and sweat," or "I am looking for minor jobs to earn my wealth, not hard jobs." It is generally believed that work is the medicine for poverty. In most cases, when poverty is replaced by prosperity, the African often abandons work for pleasure. So, at the root of many of our conflicts is the fact that those who control Africa's destiny enjoy "the fruits of poor labor."<sup>33</sup>

The church stands as a witness to the dignity of labour. The church should speak out against laziness and exploitation. Through dialogue the importance of labor should be identified and communicated to the leaders of societies. Interfaith dialogue and national development, interfaith dialogue and human survival, or interfaith dialogue and the war against poverty and starvation, and many other themes that stress the dignity of labor should be discussed by the church. One may assert with little or no reservation that work is next to godliness because the Holy Spirit prefers to live in a sound body to work the miracle of reconciliation with God.

### Concluding Remarks

Dialogue conferences become immensely useful when the outcome of the deliberations are well publicized to reach everyone, from the top to the grassroots in society, and do not remain in the libraries only. To achieve this, all available media should be employed to advertise the witness and defense of the church.

At local level, the church should establish fora for the "in-community" interfaith dialogue. Departments for interfaith dialogue should be established in every country, and in large countries such as Nigeria, in every State.

The time has come for the church to increase its labor-promoting institutions which are to train the young people of the interfaith community; these will become the foundation for a new labor culture. Institutions such as trade schools, agricultural schools, administrative and engineering schools, are some of Africa's greatest needs today. The church must remember that whatever is done in the name of Christ is witnessing. The sacrifice must be made and God must be glorified.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> J. Haafkens, "Islam and Christianity in Africa," *PROCURA* pub., 1991, p. 1.
- <sup>2</sup> I. A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours, 1708-1818* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 9.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Muhsin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 196-199.
- <sup>5</sup> John B. O. Losi, *Itan Eko Nipa Omo Oba* [The history of the princes of Lagos] (Lagos: CMS, 1934), p. 49.
- <sup>6</sup> *Current Dialogue*, No. 12, June 1987, p. 22.
- <sup>7</sup> *Encounter of Religions in African Cultures* (Geneva: LWF, 1991), p. v.

## *Religious Pluralism in Africa: Challenge and Response*

- <sup>8</sup> *Current Dialogue*, No. 17, 1989, p. 17.
- <sup>9</sup> The first meeting on interfaith dialogue was held 13 November 1992 in Bukuru at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN).
- <sup>10</sup> Sponsored by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).
- <sup>11</sup> Sam Babs Mala, "Islam in Nigerian Politics and the Christian Response, 1979-1983," in *Consultation of the Christian Councils of West Africa on Christian-Muslim Relations*, 25-28 November 1984, ed. Nat Idarous (Monrovia: AACC), p. 112.
- <sup>12</sup> E.O. Oyelade, "Religion, Politics, and Peace in Africa: A Study of Religious Pluralism and Islamic Fundamentalism in Africa," in *Religion and Peace in Multifaith Nigeria*, ed. J.K. Olupona (Ile-Ife: 1992), pp. 181-183.
- <sup>13</sup> E.O. Oyelade, "The Influence of Politics on Religious Dialogue," in Report and papers of *The First International Conference on Christian-Muslim Mutual Relations*, Miango, Jos, 2-6 November 1993, pp. 69-83.
- <sup>14</sup> E.O. Oyelade, "Religion, Politics, and Peace in Africa."
- <sup>15</sup> See: Phil. 2:8.
- <sup>16</sup> See: Rev. 22:7, 11-12.
- <sup>17</sup> Clinton Bennet, "Dialogue: Witness or Treason," *Current Dialogue*, No. 14, June 1988, p. 34.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Klipies Kritzinger (Professor of Missiology, University of Pretoria) observes that even some Western scholars often regarded "mission" as synonymous with Western arrogance, colonialism and the destruction of culture. (See K. Kritzinger, "Introduction to Some Issues in Missiology," a lecture paper distributed at a meeting of PROCURA in Nairobi, Kenya, in July-August, 1993.)
- <sup>20</sup> Read: Acts 2:22-24.
- <sup>21</sup> Read: Mt. 22:23-33; 1 Cor. 15:12-15.
- <sup>22</sup> Phil. 3:12-16.
- <sup>23</sup> Kritzinger, "Introduction to Some Issues," p. 2.
- <sup>24</sup> Jn. 3:13-18.
- <sup>25</sup> Jn. 3:16; Lk. 19:10; 2 Cor. 5:18, etc.



- <sup>26</sup> The case of Rwanda is most pathetic. For details, read *Tam Tam*, AACC, June-July 1994, No. 4, pp. 2-7.
- <sup>27</sup> Op.cit., *Tam Tam*, Aug.-Sept. 1994, p. 5. The needs are made clear—moral and spiritual recovery.
- <sup>28</sup> See: the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1979, p. 25, section 35, on the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
- <sup>29</sup> Attention is called to the "Declaration on Religious Rights and Responsibilities," compiled as an outcome of an international conference on "Religion and Peace," pub. South African Chapter (undated).
- <sup>30</sup> Prov. 29:2.
- <sup>31</sup> *The African Challenge*, AACC, Vo 1. 2, No. 2, May 1988, p. 12.
- <sup>32</sup> Jesus told several parables of work which show his labor as example of divine commitment, e.g., the sower, the rich farmer, etc. (Lk. 8:5f, Lk. 12:13f).
- <sup>33</sup> General Ibrahim Babangida, reflecting on productive labor, reminded the authorities of the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, Kuru, Nigeria, of the responsibility of "producing men and women imbued with vision and patriotism, commitment and dedication who will help change our society for the better." Speech (undated) at the 10th Graduation Ceremony of the National Institute, pp. 3f.

## THE NEED FOR INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

---

*Joseph A. Ilori*

### Introduction

---

The aim of this paper is to examine the theological, social and economic bases for interfaith dialogue. It further seeks to examine the nature this dialogue must assume in the face of modern African thought and contemporary problems. This study gives us the opportunity to examine various definitions and various kinds of dialogue. In addition, this paper discusses the theological virtues and implications of interfaith dialogue.

### Necessity for Dialogue

---

The number of ideologies, cultures and religions throughout the world is continually on the increase, and there seems little chance that this tendency will be reversed.

One can no longer adopt an attitude of mere tolerance when faced with such multiplicity, as one could have done in the past when such civilizations, cultures and religions were closed-in systems, independent of one another. Coexistence, or more exactly, merely living side by side—was sufficient then to establish peaceful relations between them. But such an attitude is becoming daily less feasible.

Today we should rather talk of frankly accepting other systems as they are and of opening ourselves up to them under our true colors, in order to seek beyond our differences the points on which we agree and which can lead us to a higher unity than that which binds us to the members of our own particular group.

Through the growth and expansion of all major religious traditions, population movements, and improved methods of communication, religiously pluralistic societies have become a reality of modern life in almost all societies. No religious community can live in isolation, and it is in the interest of all to promote dialogue and good neighborly relations.

The aim of dialogue is to establish communion between two partners. Here, such a communion is realized by friendly relations and peace with one another. Faced with a world torn by ethical, racial, political and ideological strife, we must react by establishing good relations with those with whom we come into contact. This is a spirit we have to create around us. With humankind menaced by all sorts of dangers, we can no longer think in terms of rich or poor, Muslims or Christians, believers or unbelievers, but of brothers and sisters who must help one another to preserve human dignity and to restore to individuals their rightful place in a society ever more marked by kinship. All of us are up against the same problems and dangers. This new situation draws us all more closely to one another, since we share a common belief in the same God, and we proclaim ourselves his servants.

Muslims affirm without any ambiguity and with great force their faith in the mystery of the one God. Their theology, their cult and their personal piety all insist on this great God, the impenetrable master, without equal, the one and only God. He is the complete being, whose existence and entire supremacy over all creation the believers will affirm all the more strongly as they recognize themselves totally dependent on him and entirely submissive to his will. This affirmation of the absolute transcendence of God, which the Muslim derives from his Oneness, is the very soul of Islam.

Christians do not find such an expression of faith strange to them. They also recognize the absolute transcendence of God. On the practical level, there is no clash between Christian and Muslim ways of thinking. First of all,



for the former the affirmations suppose and include most of what the other has to say. If Christians know God as the God of love, they also realize that he is infinitely great. If human beings can be called children of the Father who is in heaven, they are his servants fundamentally and foremost. If divine mercy is dispensed so generously, it is also a free gift granted by God's unhampered will. At the same time, one can say that Muslims do not reject the idea of intimacy with God, found in Christianity. Their aspirations lead them to seek for something beyond the horizon of what can be known by reason alone.

Thus there is no unbridgeable gap between Christians and Muslims in the way they put their religious tenets into practice. The Christian believes all that the Muslim says about God, and the Muslim instinctively tends towards the realities expressed by the Christian.

These considerations should lead us, for the purpose of dialogue, to revise the way we express our spirituality. The whole Bible stands on one firm foundation: there is one God, no other. Apostasy in the Bible is to believe that there are other gods, that they are real, and to worship them. The Bible therefore begins with creation, a biblical concept that is fundamental to the Christian relationship with people of other faiths. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). This belief that God is the creator of everything and everybody is basic to the Bible.

The basic assumption of the Bible, then, is that there is no other provider but God—the one God—who is the creator of everyone. People may or may not have an adequate understanding of who this God is, and their worship may or may not do justice to their understanding of God. But ultimately they are all provided for by this one God. Therefore, from God's side there can only be one family, the human family.

Interfaith dialogue is a necessity and should be established at various levels. This necessity arises out of several factors, such as:



## *The Need for Interfaith Dialogue*

- The specific historic roots which Christianity and Islam have in common.
- Belief in one God—the Almighty.
- All people have common parents and so are brothers and sisters.
- People are not only religious but also social. They live in society. To succeed, they must therefore obey societal laws.
- The increased mobility and mixing of populations which has made meetings of people of different religions much more common, and has increased the responsibility of all religions to find ways of living together in the same society.
- The special present situation with regard to the political problems in the world.

People of living faiths agree on many points. In those things where their stands are not clear, dialogue helps to clear ignorance, prejudice and doubts. Dialogue is an effective agent of peace, harmony, love and progress. Sincere dialogue enhances:

- Humility: The participants accept one another as equals.
- Love: It is this that unites their aspirations, desires and efforts.
- Truth: They sincerely seek the truth, having abandoned prejudices.

- Knowledge: New light is shed on ideas, subjects and methods.
- Social life: Exchange of ideas, joys, peace, gifts, mutual assistance will increase.

### **Kinds of Dialogue**

---

According to Chapman (1989), dialogue means a conversation, but a conversation with an aim: to discover the truth. All dialogue involves an exchange, an interplay between speaking and suggesting on the one hand and listening and receiving on the other. Dialogue is, therefore, the opposite of monologue. It requires reciprocity and a certain quality. It is without prejudice to the participant's personal conviction that his/her communion is more authentic or closer to the truth.

Dialogue is not merely discourse. It is primarily a way of being together in charity which gradually changes and renews the atmosphere essential for a joint profession of faith. Dialogue is not a confrontation between people of different religions which are concerned about their own positions and their own structures. Dialogue is the contact that is established between people of different and even sometimes opposed positions, who are attempting to overcome their mutual prejudices and broaden, as far as possible, their areas of mutual agreement, whether this takes place on the plane of simple human relations or that of a quest for the truth or of collaboration to attain ends of a practical nature.

So, naturally, dialogue can take on many different forms according to the purpose for which we meet one another and according to our own personal characteristics and dispositions. The kinds of dialogue include the following classifications:

## *The Need for Interfaith Dialogue*

*The dialogue of life:* This goes on in all situations of plurality. Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, people of many different faiths in fact live and work together sharing a life in common. Even though these dialogues go unnoticed and are not consciously religious, we should recognize their importance in the building-up of human relationships.

*A similar dialogue* also takes place where people of different traditions come together to struggle for justice, peace, human rights, etc., or to *work on common issues* that concern society as a whole. The solidarity that this builds across religious frontiers is not often given sufficient credit, but it, too, is significant in dialogue.

*Organized dialogue:* Organized dialogue is of three types. The most common occurs where representative groups of people come together to discuss a subject relevant to the communities concerned, such as the relationship of religion to the family, to education, to the State. In addition to clarifying points of difference, such dialogues help to facilitate the building-up of trust and openness between religious groups.

A second type of organized dialogue is the academic dialogue, where exponents of different religious faiths meet and discuss the theological and philosophical bases of their traditions. Here, genuine attempts are made to arrive at a common appreciation of the way in which each religious tradition has sought to explain and approach reality. These dialogues help in breaking down prejudices and misconceptions accumulated in the past. They enrich, enlarge, challenge and correct the way some religions understand and approach religious life in other traditions.

A third kind of organized dialogue may be described as spiritual dialogue. Here, believers attempt to meet each other, as it were, in the "cave of the heart" (*Guidelines for Dialogue between Muslims and Christians*, 1969). They expose themselves to each other's spiritual and worship life. Often such dialogues take the form of participating in the prayer or meditation practices of others. This type of dialogue remains controversial because most believers have not agreed on



whether it is possible to participate in the spiritual life of their neighbors without compromising their faith.

It is in existing communities where families meet as neighbors and where children play together that spontaneous dialogue develops. Where people of different faiths and ideologies share common activities, intellectual interests, and spiritual quests, dialogue can be related to the whole of life and can become a style of living in relationship.

Common activities and experiences are the most fruitful setting for dialogue on issues of faith, ideology and action. It is in search for a just community of humankind that people of different faiths will be able to help each other break out of cultural, educational, political and social isolation in order to realize a more participatory society.

Dialogue at times includes extending and accepting invitations to visit each other as guests and observers in family and community rituals, ceremonies, and festivals. Such occasions provide excellent opportunities to enhance the mutual understanding of neighbors.

Working together on common projects and in common activities or visiting in homes and at festivals will eventually raise the very difficult and important question of fuller sharing in common prayer, worship or meditation. This is one of the areas of dialogue which is most controversial and most in need of further exploration.

### **Attitudes to Be Taken in Interfaith Dialogue**

One needs to insist on this point, namely, that dialogue can only take place with people who, like us, have their own heritage and who are subject to the influence of their own past, who have their own ways of thought and their own personal temperaments. Dialogue cannot take place between systems of philosophy or between religions, but only between human beings experiencing human and religious influences.



## *The Need for Interfaith Dialogue*

The principal element in all dialogue is precisely the relationship which is established between individuals: a relationship which varies from one person to another and is never identical. It evolves as dialogue and is pursued, according to whether the two people concerned strengthen or weaken the temporary link which first brought them into contact with one another. The human being as it is today, and as it would like to be, is both the subject and the object of every form of dialogue.

*Attitude of sharing lives:* So as to be completely present to others, one must first of all be willing to share their lives, to belong psychologically to their world, while remaining faithful to oneself and to one's faith.

According to their abilities, individuals must realize this integration into the world in which others live by acquiring a knowledge of their language and their culture, both past and present, and of the actual conditions in which they live along with their hopes for the future. No dialogue will be possible until this task has been undertaken. In what spirit, then, must it be approached?

*Attitude of friendship:* Relations between Muslims and Christians have all too often been marred by opposition and conflict. The two communities have tended to go their separate ways. This is not a favorable climate for dialogue, and we must do what we can to change it.

The one thing that really matters is that our heart should be full of welcoming feelings for the other person. To extend a warm welcome to others means also to accept them as they really are, with their historical background, their own feelings and their own patterns of thought. This can lead us very far, for it is not merely a question of adapting ourselves, but in some way or other of getting outside our own mentality, and entering into that of the other person while still remaining ourselves.

It would be wrong to consider this interior attitude as mere sentimentality. Without it, the persons concerned will never really encounter one another in the search for truth

through dialogue. For, if it is true to say that all dialogue must lead to some sort of communion of mind and heart, however minimal, in order to be successful, then, to achieve this result, it is necessary for those taking part to accept one another, at least to some extent. Without a minimum of goodwill towards others, and sympathy with them there cannot be any real dialogue.

*We must accept people of other faiths as the sort of persons they choose to be:* One of the first tasks that all believers will have to undertake will be to get to know their Christian or Muslim partners in dialogue, not only as they really are, but also as they would like to be. Our knowledge should not merely be like that of the sociologist, which can be expressed in a number of cut-and-dried statements, but rather like that of friends who look for, and seek to appreciate, what is best in those they love.

This may entail for some of us a complete change of attitude. For dialogue makes us look on others in a new light. We must not consider them as enemies we have to overthrow, nor as disciples we have to teach or even to indoctrinate, as candidates to be won over, nor as people to be interviewed and made to talk, but as companions with whom we want to share as friends and equals that which is the very best in our common existence. We must adopt the attitude of a servant. If we want to understand somebody, we must not try to take possession of him, but become his guest.

To do this, we must get to know one another. This means acquiring a knowledge of the cultural background of the persons with whom we are speaking, knowing something of their social-cultural milieu and historical background, being acquainted with their likes and dislikes.

At present, our primary task is not to persuade the Muslims to enter into dialogue with us, for the simple reason that dialogue, like friendship, cannot be constrained nor produced by mere exhortation. Our first task is to bring about a progressive change of mentality in our fellow Christians. This is what really matters, but it is an immense task and one

which is going to take a long time to achieve. A change of heart is very important for all who wish to encounter in their partners real persons and not their outdated image, inherited from the past or distorted by prejudice and calumny.

We should be animated by a deep respect and a disinterested love for those who are taking part in this dialogue with us. This does not mean that we must agree with our partners all along the line. What it does exclude merely is expressing disapproval or indulging in polemics. Neither side need fear to state the points on which they disagree. On the contrary, the fact of pluralism requires us to show ourselves as we really are. Both sides have a duty to try and understand the points on which they disagree just as much as the points on which they are in agreement; unfortunately, many people get no further than this.

The ideas given in this paper have no other purpose than humbly to suggest where certain landmarks may be found on the road which brings Muslims, Christians and people of other faiths closer together. The aim of such dialogue is not to convert the other party, nor to make them doubt their own faith. It should quite simply stimulate those taking part not to remain inert in the positions they have adopted, but to help all concerned to find a way to become better people in themselves and to improve their relations with one another so as to make the world as a whole a better place to live in.

### **Theological Virtue of Interfaith Dialogue**

---

All religions have something to teach us or to recall to us. They all invite us to reconsider the way in which we manifest our faith by words, concepts, feelings and acts. They reveal to us new ways of being which will lead us to discover insights which have so far been left in darkness or not sufficiently put into practice.



Thus, it is clear that interfaith dialogue is not aimed at taking advantage of anybody. It is a serious search for the whole truth. In dialogue, we have an opportunity to share with our brothers and sisters of other faiths the great truths of a religion in which we believe and in which we find spiritual enrichment. We also listen to them as they explain their faith and give us opportunity to ask questions.

The whole exercise is meant to be mutually enriching; so there is no question of one party trying to gain an advantage over the other. The primary objective we must fix for ourselves in any dialogue is to remove barriers and to increase the amount of good in the world by a free exchange of ideas.

To remove barriers of suspicion, misunderstanding or willful misinterpretation of the other party's intention—this is what is demanded of all the participants in dialogue. It is evident that intellectual honesty such as faithfulness and fidelity in explaining the truth as we know it and in a spirit of love, is what dialogue demands. Hence, mature people who know the teachings of their religion and can appreciate the views of the other party are those who can engage in dialogue. Impetuous youths who have not yet intelligently grasped the chief points of their own faith are not yet in a position to understand the other party's views, so they should learn from their elders how to engage in dialogue.

Dialogue is for the sake of people, to help recover their religious sense in the modern world vis-a-vis its anti-religious forces. To recover one's religious meaning is, among other things, to detect in oneself sources of irreligion, precisely in one's feelings of complacency and self-sufficiency about one's religious beliefs. Dialogue can be effective, as perhaps nothing else can, in helping one recover from being lost, religiously speaking, to the sense of self-assurance or adequacy and completeness.



## *The Need for Interfaith Dialogue*

Interfaith dialogue brings home to us a new dimension of theologizing experience versus a felt sense of "incompleteness," a sense of the need for the truly other, the "other" in the way of thinking and feeling that one cannot simply assimilate to one's own, but which one confronts inescapably; in other words, encounter. It is the "other" which comes with the demand to be understood in terms of its incommunicable "otherness."

By virtue of its very adequacy and relevance, interfaith dialogue opens itself for looking beyond itself, and evokes in one a creative need for the other.

Interfaith dialogue is not a mere encounter of commitments and beliefs held in deep sincerity and faith, and acknowledgment and even promotion of the right of freedom of pursuit. While it is not less than this, it is certainly more than a meeting of faiths. It is sharing.

Dialogue can be recognized as a welcome way of obedience to the commandment of the Decalogue: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Dialogue helps us not to disfigure the image of our neighbors of different faiths and ideologies. In dialogue, believers actively respond to the command to "Love God and your neighbor as yourself." As an expression of love engagement, dialogue testifies to the love experienced in Christ. It is a joyful affirmation of life against chaos and in participation with all who are allies of life in seeking the provisional goals of a better human community. According to Chukwulozie (1986), dialogue in community is not a secret weapon in the armory of an aggressive Christian or Muslim militancy. Rather it is a means of living our faith in the service of community with one's neighbors.

In dialogue, a believer seeks to speak the truth in a spirit of love, not naively to be "tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14). In giving their witness, the believers recognize that in most circumstances today the spirit of dialogue is necessary. For this reason, we do not see dialogue and witnessing as being in any contradiction to one another. Indeed, as Christians or Muslims enter dia-

logue with their commitment to God, time and again the relationship of dialogue gives opportunity for authentic witness.

Dialogue is not only an activity of meetings and conferences, it is also a way of living out our Christian or Muslim faith in relationship and commitment to those neighbors with whom believers share town, cities, nations, and the earth as a whole. Dialogue is a style of living in relationship with neighbors.

## Conclusion

---

Interfaith dialogue should be developed in discussion, study and action and a common concern for the responsibility of all persons of faith, in and towards today's social and political problems.

Because of the divisive role to which all religions and ideologies are so easily prone, they are each called to look upon themselves anew so as to contribute from their resources to the good of the community of humankind in its wholeness. Two methods of fostering understanding among people of different faiths especially commend themselves to us. The first of these entails witnessing in society to the highest and best in our respective religions by the example of our personal manner of life, behavior, and worship. The second method involves us in engaging in a spirit of goodwill, in discourse with all interested persons about the teaching of our respective religions.

## References

- Abdul, M.O., and Chukwulozie, V. 1977. "The First Official Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Nigeria," *Nigerian Dialogue: A Journal of Inter-Faith Studies on the Relation between Christianity and non-Christian Religions*, Vol. 2, No. 2. pp. 11-16.
- Brown, S.E. (ed.). 1989. *Meeting in Faith* (Geneva: WCC).

## *The Need for Interfaith Dialogue*

Chapman, C. 1989. "Rethinking the Gospel for Muslims," in *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road*, ed. J.D. Woodberry (Monrovia CA: MARC Publications). p. 112.

Chukwulozie, V. 1986. *Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Daystar Press).

*Guidelines for Dialogue Between Muslims and Christians*. 1969.  
Secretariat pro non-Christiani (Rome: Edizioni Ancora), p. 112.

*Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* 1979  
(Geneva: WCC).



## A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

---

*Charles Villa-Vicencio*

*For me Jesus Christ is the revelation of God, but I am opposed to proselytization. Our task as Christians is simply to live attractive lives that are transparent with the gospel. We take ourselves too seriously when we think that God is relying on our evangelical campaigns to make everyone Christians, in order for them to enter into communion with God.*

*—Archbishop Desmond Tutu<sup>1</sup>*

"I am the way, the truth and the life" (Jn. 14:6). These words, attributed by St John to Jesus, suggest both continuity and discontinuity between Christianity and other religions:

Religions are not first and foremost institutionalized systems but Ways. Aren't the Old and New Testaments full of talk about the Way of the Lord? Weren't the first Christians called followers of the Way? Doesn't the first Sura of the Koran talk about the straight Way? Doesn't Hinduism know three Ways to salvation? Doesn't Buddhism talk about the Eightfold Path? Here it seems to me, we have a good starting point for dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

God is the God of all people. His presence is known among all nations, all religions and all peoples of the earth (Hos. 1:10; 2:23; Rom. 9:26). He is proclaimed to all people through his good creation (Ps. 19:10). His covenant is with all the earth (Gen. 9:9-10). He has left no people without witnesses (Acts 14:16-17). People will be judged on the basis

of the lives that they live (Mt. 25:31f.), according to the light they have received (Rom. 2:12f.). In Jesus Christ God's love and redemption are extended to all humankind (Jn. 3:16).

Of course we can find texts witnessing to both the universalism and the exclusivism of God's love in the Bible. These texts can be (and often are) the object of exegesis to the point of ingenuity! The point of the above paragraph is simply to affirm that the Scriptures include a strong universalistic character. The question I seek to address in what follows is: How can we affirm the truth of our religious experience and the importance of our particular religious tradition (for us and our fellow believers) without denying the omnipresence of one God whose universal love extends to all humankind? I offer two theological comments that reach to the heart of the Christian belief—the *incarnation* and *mission*.

### **Rediscovering the Incarnation**

---

Missionary activity in many parts of Africa has been largely influenced by Protestant piety. It has also been almost exclusively Western. This has given Christianity in large parts of Africa the kind of Christocentric character which suggests that Africans were without a knowledge of God and condemned to hell before being offered salvation by Christian missionaries. The colonial dimension of the experience should escape no one's attention.

This belief in Christocentric exclusivism—perhaps better described as Christocentric *reductionism*—needs to be challenged by a less reductionistic Christology, as seen primarily in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. This tradition has long expressed a concern that Christocentric theology (of the kind identified here) separates Christ from the mystery of the Trinity. Metropolitan George Khodr argues that having "displaced [Christ] from the bosom of the Father," Christocentrism tends to neglect further the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in revealing the *hidden Christ*.<sup>3</sup>

The distinction between who God is and our understanding of God—however piously motivated, is also a concern of evangelical Reformed theology.<sup>4</sup> This becomes clear in what is often referred to as the *Extra Calvinisticum*. For John Calvin, the eternal Son of God is known in the incarnate Christ, without suggesting that he is totally present in the flesh. Unlike Luther, Calvin was not prepared to talk of “God being born in a manger” or “dying on the cross.” For him it is the incarnate Son of God who is so born and crucified. Calvin’s “Spirit Christology,” in turn, gives content to the *Filioque* provision in a manner that ensures that the Spirit is not subordinate to the incarnate Son.

This concern not to reduce the mystery of God to human understanding has persuaded Khodr to speak of Christ as being “everywhere hidden in the mystery of his self-effacement.”<sup>5</sup> Put slightly differently, Christ is hidden in his self-revelation. The New Testament tells us that not everyone recognized the Christ within Jesus of Nazareth. We would do well to pray the New Testament prayer for eyes that see, ears that hear and hearts that understand. This will enable us to perceive Christ in such places and manifestations where we do not, given our entrenched presuppositions, expect to encounter him.

Hermeneutically it is we who define Christ. We have no knowledge of Christ in and of himself. To reduce the divine mystery to an identifiable object (which we call the Christ) that can be possessed, owned, exploited and used to serve our own ideological ends is at best arrogant. At worst it is blasphemy.

We have spoken of the *mystery* of God’s revelation in Christ. The incarnation is at the same time a *kenotic* activity, within which the eternal Son is divested of all heavenly attributes in order to become human. It is within Christ’s “self-abasement”—as the one who is hungry, in prison, exploited and marginalized—that the incarnate God is found. Here Luther is, of course, correct. God was born in a manger.



In brief, the mystery of God and the self-emptying of that mystery constitute a dialectic within a biblical doctrine of the incarnation that triumphalistic notions of Christian mission tend to overlook. The Council of Chalcedon was compelled to conclude that although the union between the two natures of Christ was complete, the differences between divine and human nature remained. Jesus is the eternal Son of God. Jesus is also a 1st-century Palestinian Jew. In the words of Paul Knitter: To encounter the self-revelation of God in Christ is never to encounter a stranger.<sup>6</sup>

Stanley Samartha asks, "How can we sing a foreign song in the Lord's land?"<sup>7</sup> Gabriel Setiloane captures a similar concern in his poem "I am an African":

For ages He eluded us, this Jesus of Bethlehem, Son of Man:  
Going first to Asia and to Europe, and the western sphere,  
Some say He tried to come to us, ....

The White Man brought Him.  
He was pale, and not the Sunburnt Son of the Desert.  
As a child He came.

A wee little babe wrapped in swaddling clothes.  
Ah, if only He had been like little Moses lying  
Sun-scorched on the banks of the River of God  
We would have recognized Him.  
He eludes us still this Jesus, Son of Man.

His words. Ah, they taste so good  
As sweet and refreshing as the sap of the palm raised and  
nourished on African soil  
The Truths of His words are for all men, for all time.

And yet for us it is when He is on the cross,  
This Jesus of Nazareth, with holed hands  
and open side, like a beast at a sacrifice:

When He is stripped naked like us,  
Browned and sweating water and blood in the heat of the sun,  
Yet silent,  
That we cannot resist Him.<sup>8</sup>

Merely to inculturalize the gospel can, of course, be little more than a subtle form of conquest. It can be to employ the symbols of another religion to proselytize and conquer. Raimundo Panikkar suggests that Christianity has emerged as a dominant religion precisely because of its ability and willingness to assimilate the symbols of other religions and cultures.<sup>9</sup> "The Church," P. Chenchiah reminds us, "is syncretic—having patched up paganism with Christianity. It has forgotten it and gets cross if reminded."<sup>10</sup> Herein lies the strength of Christianity, but also a potential danger in its encounter with other religions.

The encounter between religions and the relocation of religions within different cultures raises a host of questions: Not least is the question posed by Kenneth Cracknell of whether the name of Christ is translatable.<sup>11</sup> The Hellenization of the gospel of Jesus in the New Testament is but one case in point. The cosmology of the Colossian Christological image (Col. 1:15) is strongly influenced by Philo. The notion of the Logos as the intermediary between the One and the many—between God and humanity, is neo-Platonic. To what extent is it legitimate to re-image Christ into the culture of a particular people? The importance of this question for feminist theology, African theology and many other cultural theological initiatives is overwhelming. At what point does Christianity itself change in the re-imaging process? We do not have an "original" Christianity against which to measure the question. What, if any, are the non-translatable ingredients of the Christian religion? The provocation could be endless.

It is quite wrong for Christians to tell Muslims, Hindus or African traditional religionists that their religious symbols are in fact a manifestation of Christ. This is why we today

reject any talk of people of other faiths being called "anonymous Christians" (Rahner). Given our groundedness in our own religious tradition, however, if we carefully look, listen and seek to understand we may well see what we perceive to be the presence of Christ beyond our own religion. This becomes the basis for interfaith dialogue. It is not an excuse to proselytize. So what then of mission?

### **Reaffirming Mission**

Mission has too often degenerated into mere proselytizing, driven by a variety of chauvinistic motives. It has become more than one beggar telling another where to find bread. Samartha at the same time reminds us that "mission" and "conversion" are legitimate religious terms.<sup>12</sup> Without mission there would have been no Buddhism or Jainism, and Christianity would not have emerged out of Judaism. To ask a religious person not to share and indeed promote his or her understanding of the good news is to deny that person a basic freedom. Such freedom is, however, never a right to violate the sensitivities, rights or freedoms of another.

Mission is necessarily grounded in the personal experience of the person engaged in mission. It is to share with others the richness of the universal God in the particular. In so doing, it is important to know that there is no way of bypassing the particular in encountering the universal God. In Troeltschian categories, the absolute *can* only be experienced in relation to the particular.<sup>13</sup> To seek to limit God to *our* particular is egocentric arrogance—a manifestation of what Hans Ucko calls the "only-child syndrome."<sup>14</sup> We are back to Christocentric reductionism. We border on a kind of Christomonism.

The difficulties involved in interreligious dialogue—not least from a Christian evangelical perspective—cannot be lightly dismissed.<sup>15</sup> There is, nevertheless, sufficient biblical evidence to suggest that mission and dialogue with other faiths must go hand in hand. Both constitute part of what is involved in the pilgrim nature of discipleship. The record of



the Hebrew Bible discloses a God who appears in the most unexpected places. Wolfhart Pannenberg suggests that while all religions are incomplete and unfulfilled, this is pre-eminently acknowledged by Christianity.<sup>16</sup> In pointing to the coming reign of God, Jesus suggested that God's reign would involve more than an affirmation of what had already taken place and what was already known. Jesus taught that the coming kingdom may well result in a rejection of much that the keepers of religious tradition held most dear. St Paul tells us: "What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror; then we shall see face to face" (1 Cor. 12:13).

T.S. Eliot's words remind us of the importance of the particular, in pursuit of ultimate truth:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.<sup>17</sup>

In the process we can hope to learn also with Archbishop Tutu "not to take ourselves too seriously." In our uncertainty, vulnerability and trust in God, whose ways are beyond our ways, we can do no other than share the grace that we have received—in less triumphalistic ways than ever before.

### *Notes*

- <sup>1</sup> In an interview at Bishops court, Cape Town, on 27 July 1993.
- <sup>2</sup> Arnulf Camps, *De Weg de Paden en de Wegen* [The Way, the Paths and the Ways], quoted in Kenneth Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faiths* (London: Epworth Press, 1986), p. 78.
- <sup>3</sup> George Khodr, "An Orthodox Perspective on Inter-Religious Dialogue," in *Current Dialogue*, No. 19, January 1991, pp. 25-27.

## *A Christian Theological Response to Religious Pluralism*

- <sup>4</sup> E. David Wells, *Calvin's Catholic Christology: The Function of the So-Called Extra Calvinisticum in Calvin's Theology* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966), pp. 78-79 and pp. 82-83.
- <sup>5</sup> George Khodr, "Christianity in a Pluralistic World—the Economy of the Holy Spirit," in *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. S.J. Samartha (Geneva: WCC, 1971), p. 138.
- <sup>6</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), p. 100.
- <sup>7</sup> Stanley J. Samartha, *Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical Issues in Inter-Religious Relationships* (Geneva: WCC, 1981), p. 88.
- <sup>8</sup> In John W. de Gruchy, *Cry Justice: Prayers, Meditations and Readings from South Africa* (London: Collins, 1986), pp. 49-53.
- <sup>9</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist, 1978), p. 58.
- <sup>10</sup> Quoted in Samartha, p. 28.
- <sup>11</sup> Cracknell, p. 62 (see note 2).
- <sup>12</sup> Stanley S. Samartha, "Mission in a Religiously Plural World," in *International Review of Mission*, Vol. LXXVIII, No. 307, pp. 320-21.
- <sup>13</sup> For a discussion on Troeltsch in relation to Christianity and other religions, see Knitter, *No Other Name?*, pp. 23-36.
- <sup>14</sup> Hans Ucko, "My Neighbour's Faith and Mine: A Report," in *Current Dialogue* No. 17, December 1989, p. 11.
- <sup>15</sup> Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 280-301.
- <sup>16</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Towards a Theology of Religions," in *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), pp. 92-96.
- <sup>17</sup> "Little Gidding," in *Four Quartets*. The Penguin Book of English Verse, ed. John Hayward (London: Penguin Books, 1956).

## SUMMARY REPORT

---

### Preamble

---

From November 30 to December 5, 1994 about 30 participants met at the UNESCO Building, Dakar, Senegal, to discuss the theme: "Religious Pluralism in Africa: Challenge and Response." The consultation was sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation. Participants came from various parts of Africa. The African group had the pleasure of also welcoming participants from Europe and Asia, i.e., those coming from Sweden, Switzerland and India.

At the opening session the group's hopes rose when the letter of LWF general secretary Dr Ishmael Noko was read in respect of the actions already taken to bring about positive changes to the Liberian situation. The group heard with joy the letter written to UN secretary-general Mr Boutros Boutros Ghali, requesting him to use his good offices and all available resources at his disposal to bring about positive pressures that would quickly end the crisis in Liberia where thousands are reported dying daily.

Against this background, Dr Hance Mwakabana, the secretary for Church and People of Other Faiths, Department for Theology and Studies, challenged the participants to enter into the conference ready to "reflect not only on the contextual perspective [of religious pluralism], but also on the significance of other faiths as part of a reality to live with and for which we must prepare ourselves."

At the conference, eight papers were presented on various sub-themes: 1) The Church and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism: A Historical and Contemporary Perspective, 2) The Challenge of Religious Pluralism in Africa: Case Studies. On this theme two presentations were made, representing Eritrea and Nigeria. 3) The Challenge of Religious Pluralism in a Global Context: A Contribution from the



European Experience, and A Contribution from the Asian Experience. 4) Interfaith Dialogue and the Witness of the Church in the Multifaith Context of Africa. 5) The Need for Interfaith Dialogue 6) A Christian Theological Response to Religious Pluralism.

The unforgettable aspects of these presentations include the fact that the presenters did a very comprehensive research based on practical experiences on the one hand, and on documents on the other hand. As a result, the papers were presented with confidence and sincerity. The group responded by raising many useful questions which further enlightened us and encouraged us to approach the various challenges identified positively in our various countries. The summary report of the presentations follows:

### **Universality of Christ**

---

We celebrate our belief as Christians that there is one God who is the God of all people. God's covenant is with his entire creation. This God has left no nation without witnesses to him. We recognize that all people, Christians and people of other faiths alike, shall be judged according to the light that they have received and on the basis of the moral practices that characterize their lives.

Christ is the Lord of all creation, his love extends to all humankind, and his redemption is for the entire world. The work of the Holy Spirit makes the revelation of God in Christ known throughout the entire universe. We pray for eyes that may see, ears that may hear and hearts that may understand, so that we may discern the presence of God made known to us in Jesus Christ in all places and in all people.

We acknowledge that our own human frailty, religious exclusivism and human desire to control have made us believe that Christ's work is limited to and can be controlled by the institutional church. As Christ has called us to go into all the world, this same Christ is to be found beyond our-

selves, our church, our religion and our culture. In him there is no Jew nor Greek, no male nor female, neither slave nor master—we are all one in Christ.

It is in this spirit that we engage in our missionary task to make known and to discover the greatness of God's self-revelation among all people. We claim not to comprehend fully the majesty and mystery of God, while celebrating our sincere belief that in Christ we have heard the good news of salvation and the call to reconciliation with our neighbors. We await the full disclosure of God's presence in the fullness of time when all people shall be united in his presence.

We at the same time recognize that there are certain biblical norms by which we are called to live. There are sacraments that sustain us and a Christian liturgy that gives us our identity as a people of God. It is in baptism that we are incorporated into the body of Christ. In the Eucharist we are forgiven and renewed. In fellowship with other Christians we are enriched.

We recognize the need to understand these practices in the gift of the universality of God's love made known in Christ. We pledge ourselves to be in dialogue with all people and all religions as we seek to deepen our knowledge of our own traditions and those of others.

---

## **The Church**

---

The Church of Christ worldwide has been called by Christ to be the light and salt of the world by teaching and putting into practice his teachings.

The witness of the church is mainly based on following Christ in the midst of different socioeconomic systems and religious pluralism. In this situation, Christians should see themselves not only in relationship to the church but mainly in relationship to Christ's kingdom.

The Church of Christ is therefore called to encourage ecumenical relationship with other religions and denomina-

tions. This attitude will help to remove suspicion among our peoples and instead develop a firm mutual understanding and unconditional relationship based on the love of God.

By following Christ who accepted to be rejected in his community, the church should change its attitude towards the people of other faiths. The Church of Christ has to accept amicably the existence of other religions and recognize the good values in them. In this case the church should be open to people of other faiths. We pledge to educate our members on the need for witnessing to the people of other religions and encourage them to learn more about other religions, thus promoting dialogue.

We realize that we are looked upon by others as the servants of God. It is imperative, therefore, that as the Church of Christ we should discourage the power struggle and divisions within our systems. In this way we shall be prepared to engage in interfaith dialogue.

### **Interfaith Dialogue**

---

Interfaith dialogue derives its significance from the mutual awareness of the people of various faiths and ideologies to the challenges and demands of living together in environments they share. These challenges affect our faith, our survival and our development; hence it must be impressed upon our minds to work together through sharing our religious experiences and material benefits, leading to cooperation for the purpose of reshaping human conditions according to God's purposes. In response to the awareness, challenges and demands of living together, the church presents a witness of love, tolerance and commitment to goodwill towards humankind. In this context, it can safely be said that for us dialogue and witness are soul mates, and not antagonists. At the same time, therefore, it must be emphasized that dialogue is not a conversion movement, a task solely controlled by the Holy Spirit, but it is an approach—in a spirit of humility,



openness and sensitivity—towards a better understanding between people of different faiths as they relate to each other on the various levels of human relationships, both as individuals and as communities of faith.

Through interfaith dialogue we pledge to do the following:

- 1) Accept people of other faiths as God's people who are created in his image and likeness.
- 2) Treat adherents of other religions with respect, honesty and frankness.
- 3) Create a favorable environment where adherents of different faiths can reflect on the importance of religious pluralism in Africa, the challenges and opportunities it has for the people of this continent.
- 4) In a more practical area, engage in common community services that are participatory and which give scope to our common witness and heritage.

### **Theological Education and Interfaith Dialogue**

- Theological education gives an opportunity to theological students to have a reflection of Christian faith, as it is decisive for human existence.
- Seminaries and theological institutions, therefore, have a rare opportunity of engaging in interfaith dialogue in recognition of the importance of religious pluralism on the African continent.

- We pledge to bring this awareness to theological students in an objective way by encouraging our institutions to invite scholars of other faiths as guest speakers in seminars and workshops. We should also endeavor to introduce, as part of our theological curriculum, courses such as comparative religion, ATR and Islamic studies.
- We shall encourage students to visit worship places of people of other faiths and to attend their religious celebrations. In this way they will be able to approach other religious traditions with respect, openness and sensitivity.

### **Sociopolitical Demands for Interfaith Dialogue**

We were made more and more conscious of the fact that we live in a diverse and plural world which is placing social and political demands upon the church. Demands which impinge upon interfaith dialogue include endemic poverty in many of the African communities, unemployment, corruption, election rigging, human rights violations and injustices.

We pledge ourselves to join people of goodwill within other faiths and together to find solutions to these and other problems that affect our societies. We shall make ourselves available for interfaith meetings, forums, workshops and consultations that would strive to overcome these and other obstacles to building viable communities.

### **Our Faith and Other Faiths/Cultures**

We have seen that Christians have come to understand Christianity as the only good religion; this has not made for peaceful coexistence with people of other faiths (people of other religions).

In a religious marketplace, which our world is, we Christians must seek always to show appreciation of and respect for other people's cultural and religious values. We observe with shame that our attitude of neglect, outright rejection, and condemnation of other people's values makes them hate us, and our witnessing becomes ineffective. Power struggles and in-fighting among and in Christian denominations are obstacles to our witnessing to people of other faiths and cultures. Our Lord Jesus has directed that we let our light shine before other people so that they may see and glorify our Father.

**Question for further study:** In order to contextualize its witness, how deep should Christianity go into a given culture?

---

## Conclusion

The participants sincerely express their gratitude to the Lutheran World Federation for this consultation and wish that concerns for African situations as part of the church's global responsibility would be on the increase as the human race moves toward the end of the 20th century and beyond.





## **PARTICIPANTS**

**Dr Kajsa Ahlstrand**  
Church of Sweden  
Research Department  
S - 751 70 Uppsala  
Sweden

**Mr Joseph Belporo**  
Eglise évangélique luthérienne du Cameroun  
B.P. 6  
Ngaoundéré  
Cameroun

**Mr Joel Bobo**  
Eglise évangélique luthérienne  
B.P. 100, Quartier de Roux  
Bouar  
Rep. Centrafricaine

**Ms Siroma Houma Dadi**  
Eglise évangélique luthérienne du Cameroun  
B.P. 6  
Ngaoundéré  
Cameroun

**Bishop Ronald J. Diggs**  
Lutheran Church of Liberia  
P.O. Box 10-1046  
1000 Monrovia 10  
Liberia

**Rev. Ndeb Diouf**  
*President*  
Eglise luthérienne du Sénégal  
B.P. 9  
Fatick  
Sénégal

**Rev. Daba Fokalbo**

*Director*

Ecole de théologie du Kaélé

B.P. 25

Kaélé

Cameroun

**Ms Kirsi Hämäläinen**

La Mission Luthérienne du Sénégal

B.P. 10416

Dakar

Sénégal

**Dr Joseph A. Ilori**

P.O. Box 536

Osogbo

Nigeria

**Ms Parmata Ishaya**

L.C.C.N. Bookshop

P.O. Box 24

Yola

Adamawa State

Nigeria

**Rev. Zachariah W. Kahuthu**

*Chairperson*

Kenya Evangelical Lutheran Church

P.O. Box 54128

Nairobi

Kenya

**Rev. John Kenan**

Bronnum Lutheran Seminary

P.O. Box 74, Mbamba

Yola

Nigeria



*Religious Pluralism in Africa: Challenge and Response*

**Rev. Gabriel Kimirei**

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania

P.O. Box 3033

Arusha

Tanzania

**Rev. Ms Prasanna Kumari**

*Executive Secretary*

United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India

1, First Street, Haddows Road

Madras 600 006

South India

**Bishop Dieter R. Lilje**

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (Natal-Transvaal)

P.O. Box 7095

1622 Bonaero Park

South Africa

**Rev. Alick Msuku**

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi

P.O. Box 650

Lilongwe 1

Malawi

**Rev. Asfaha Mehari**

The Evangelical Church of Eritrea

P.O. Box 905

Asmara

Eritrea

**Rev. Daniel Ndemuweda**

Engela Parish Institute

P.O. Box 116

Oshikango

Namibia

**Prof. Zablon Nthamburi**  
*Presiding Bishop*  
The Methodist Church in Kenya  
P.O. Box 47633  
Nairobi  
Kenya

**Rev. Berhanu Ofgaa**  
*President*  
EECMY Central Ethiopia Synod  
P.O. Box 2087  
Addis Ababa  
Ethiopia

**Rev. Dr Emmanuel O. Oyelade**  
Dept. of Religious Studies  
Faculty of Arts  
Obafemi Awolowo University  
Ile-Ife  
Nigeria

**Bishop N. Rohwer**  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (Cape Church)  
240 Long Street  
8001 Cape Town  
South Africa

**Rev. Ms Blandina Sawayael**  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (Northern Diocese)  
P.O. Box 195  
Moshi  
Tanzania

**Rev. Samuel J. Udofia**  
*President*  
Lutheran Church of Nigeria  
P.O. Box 49  
Obot Idim Ibesikpo  
Uyo, Akwa Ibom State  
Nigeria

*Religious Pluralism in Africa: Challenge and Response*

**Prof. Dr. Charles Villa-Vicencio**

Dept. of Religious Studies

University of Cape Town

Private Bag

Rondebosch 7700

South Africa

**Rt. Rev. Dr David L. Windibiziri**

Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria

P.O. Box 21

Numan, Adamawa State

Nigeria

**LWF STAFF**

**Dr Hance A.O. Mwakabana**

*Secretary for Church and People of Other Faiths*

Department for Theology and Studies

Lutheran World Federation

P.O. Box 2100

150, rte de Ferney

CH - 1211 Geneva 2

Switzerland

**Mrs. Corinna Ascher**

*Secretary*

Department for Theology and Studies

Lutheran World Federation

P.O. Box 2100

150, rte de Ferney

CH - 1211 Geneva 2

Switzerland

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60637  
U.S.A.  
TEL: (312) 937-1234  
FAX: (312) 937-1234  
E-MAIL: info@uchicago.edu  
WWW: www.uchicago.edu  
The University of Chicago is a private research university in Chicago, Illinois. It was founded in 1837 and is one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in the United States. The university is known for its commitment to academic excellence and its diverse student body. It has a long history of producing world leaders in various fields of study. The university's campus is located in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago, and it covers an area of over 1,000 acres. The university is home to over 10,000 students and over 100 faculty members. It is a member of the Association of American Universities and the Ivy League. The university's motto is "The Truth Shall Make You Free."



## CONTRIBUTORS

**The Rev. Dr Kajsa AHLSTRAND** is researcher in the Church of Sweden's Research Department.

**The Rev. Dr Joseph A. ILORI** is senior lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria.

**The Rev. Prasanna KUMARI** is executive secretary of the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India and lecturer at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Madras, India.

**The Rev. Asfaha MEHARI**, the former president of the Evangelical Church of Eritrea is now a pastor.

**The Rev. Dr Hance A.O. MWAKABANA** is secretary for Church and People of Other Faiths in the LWF Department for Theology and Studies. Formerly, he was principal of the Lutheran Theological College, Makumira, Tanzania.

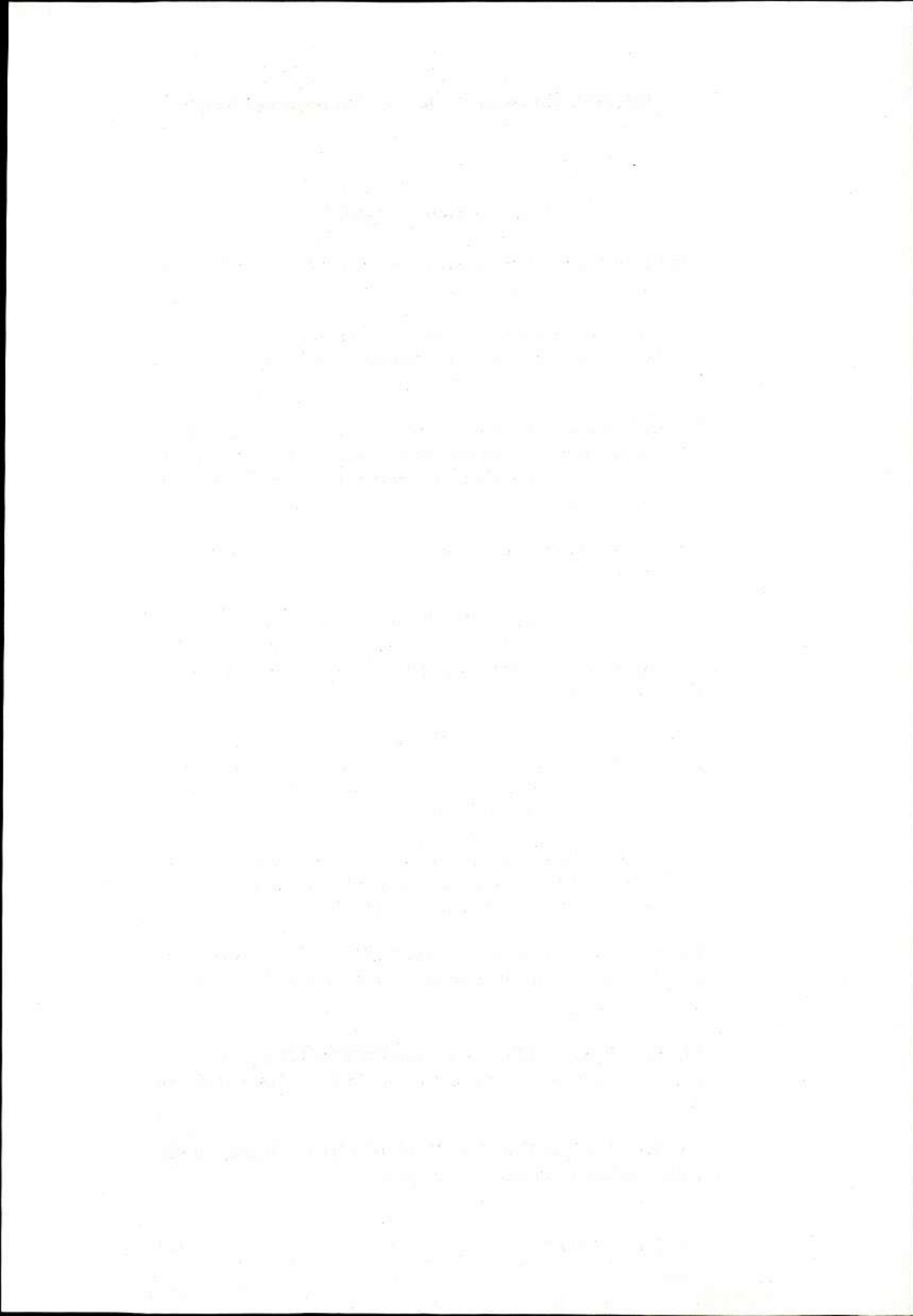
**The Rev. Dr Ishmael NOKO** is the general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) which is based in Geneva and presently consists of 122 member churches; its total membership is over 60 million around the world.

**The Rt. Rev. Dr Zablon NTHAMBURI** is presiding bishop of the Methodist Church in Kenya. Formerly, he was professor of theology at Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya.

**The Rev. Dr Emmanuel O. OYELADE** is senior lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

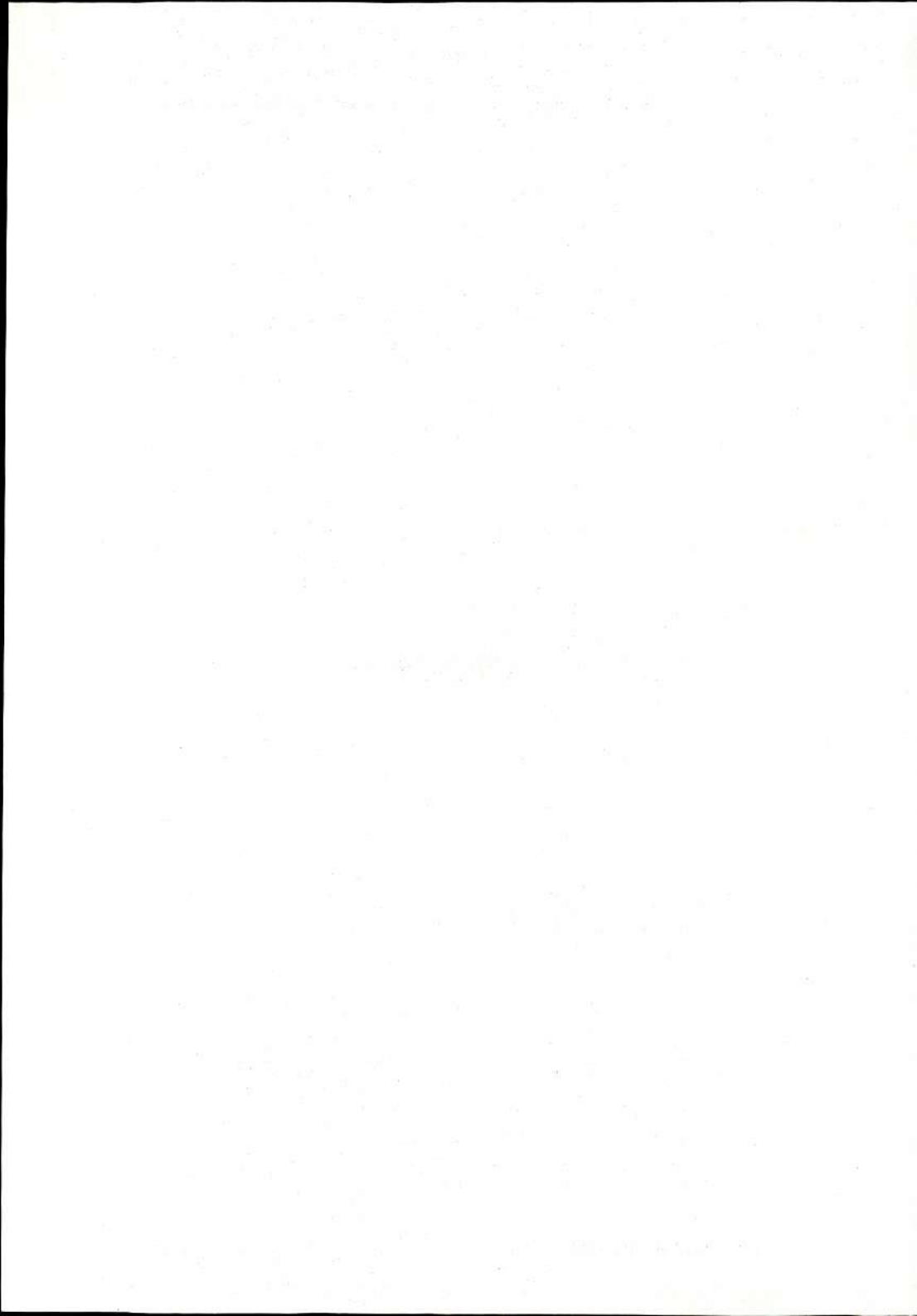
**The Rev. Prof. Dr Charles VILLA-VICENCIO** is professor of Religion and Society at the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

**The Rt. Rev. Dr David L. WINDIBIZIRI** is bishop of the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria.



## APPENDICES

---





*Religious Pluralism in Africa: Challenge and Response*

Dr Ishmael Noko  
General Secretary  
Lutheran World Federation  
150, rte de Ferney  
CH - 1211 Geneva 2  
Switzerland

Dakar, 4 December 1994

Dear Mr General Secretary,

We, the members gathered here from 25 churches from 14 countries, greet you and congratulate you on your appointment as the first general secretary of the LWF representing the Third World in a global Lutheran family. We are proud of you for your leadership and contributions to the Lutheran and ecumenical communions. We commit to pray for you and to stand by you so that your hands may be strengthened by God to do the right things at the right time. May the Lord empower you with God's wisdom to discern God's kingdom on earth. May God richly bless you and your family as you commit yourself to serve God and God's people.

We thank you for the steps you have taken regarding the civil war in Liberia. We appreciate the way you have addressed the UN General Secretary calling for involvement in Liberia to work for peace. The letter clearly expresses our pain and agony regarding the painful situation in Liberia; calling for attention and action of the UN to prevent further pain and bloodshed.

We further urge you, Mr General Secretary, to kindly address a letter to the National Council of Churches in the United States urging the churches in the US to pressurize their government not to cause further pain. Similar letters could also be addressed to other national councils in other countries to pressurize the US government to work for peace. Please find the enclosed "state-

ment of solidarity" which we request you to kindly communicate to churches—Lutheran and ecumenical—calling for solidarity and prayers.

Thanking you in anticipation for your continued support in our joint efforts for restoring peace, reconciliation and harmony, with kind regards,

Yours in the service of Christ,

Kajsa AHLSTRAND, Sweden  
Joseph BELPORO, Cameroon  
Joel BOBO, Central African Republic  
Siroma HOUMA DADI, Cameroon  
Ronald DIGGS, Liberia  
Ndeb DIOUF, Senegal  
Daba FOKALBO, Cameroon  
Joseph A. ILORI, Nigeria  
Parmata ISHAYA, Nigeria  
Zachariah W. KAHUTHU, Kenya  
John KENAN, Nigeria  
Gabriel KIMIREI, Tanzania  
Prasanna KUMARI, India  
Alick MSUKU, Malawi  
Asfaha MEHARI, Eritrea  
Daniel NDEM UWEDA, Namibia  
Zablon NTHAMBURI, Kenya  
Berhanu OFGAA, Ethiopia  
Emmanuel O. OYELADE, Nigeria  
Blandina SAWAYAEI, Tanzania  
Samuel J. UDOFIA, Nigeria  
Charles VILLA-VICENCIO, South Africa  
David L. WINDIBIZIRI, Nigeria

Enclosure

## STATEMENT ON LIBERIA

---

We participants from 25 churches from 14 countries gathered in Dakar, Senegal, from 30 November to 5 December 1994, are deeply alarmed to learn from Bishop Diggs in person, regarding the painful political situation of Liberia. The civil war has claimed and continues to claim many innocent and precious lives, resulting in inhuman conditions for people who had to face the death of their loved-ones, experiencing pain and separation. The number of refugees and displaced persons can be counted in hundreds of thousands in and outside Liberia. It was further distressing to learn that this prolonged civil war not only is affecting the present generation but is also creating future armies by the use of young boys and girls either as volunteers or as forced fighters in the civil war from the age of seven years. This is our growing, grave concern—the violations of the rights of the children.

If this situation is allowed to continue, the wounds will become much deeper resulting in extended hatred and lustful revenge, leaving no room whatsoever for healing and reconciliation.

We believe that the hope for peace and reconciliation in this situation is in strengthening the local initiatives which are already at work. It is indeed commendable that the Interfaith Mediation Committee (of the Liberian Council of Churches and the National Muslim Council of Liberia), which is already at work in spite of great risk to the lives of its members, needs our solidarity and support. As a global "community of faiths" committed to justice, peace and harmony, it is imperative to be involved without further delay, in the efforts towards peace and reconciliation. Therefore we call on the global community of faith to join together as a pressure group and assist in concrete ways, such as:

- 1) To call for special prayers—personal and communal—that God may intervene in this painful situation and restore peace, reconciliation and harmony.

- 2) To stand in solidarity with the local initiatives, particularly that of the Interfaith Mediation Committee, by writing letters to the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the leaders of the political and warring groups of Liberia, appealing for immediate cease-fire and to sit for a round-table discussion to resolve their problems.
- 3) That the UN, the US and the other governments be persuaded to pressurize the political parties and warring factions in Liberia to lay down their arms and to seek peace.
- 4) That global communities be urged to send messages of encouragement and solidarity to the Interfaith Mediation Committee and other local groups working towards peace.
- 5) That the Economic Community of West African States
  - be commended for their efforts in trying to bring peace to Liberia and to stop the carnage;
  - that they be encouraged to continue the efforts for peace.
- 6) Realizing that their efforts cannot be sustained without substantial financial resources, we urge the WCC, the LWF and other global organizations to commit themselves to support financially the Interfaith Mediation Committee to enable them to continue their efforts for peace, reconciliation and harmony.

5 December 1994



## SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

This bibliography is not exhaustive; it includes only a selected number of sources on the subject of Christianity and other faiths—today and in the past—focusing on interfaith relations.

- Abbot, S.J., Walter M., eds. *Documents of Vatican II*. New York: Guild Press, 1966.
- Amirtham, Sam, and S. Wesley Ariarajah,, eds. *Ministerial Formation in a Multi-Faith Milieu*. Geneva: WCC, 1986.
- Anderson, Gerald H., and Thomas F. Stransky, eds. *Mission Trends No. 5: Faith Meets Faith*. New York, 1981.
- Ariarajah, S. Wesley. *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993.
- Brockway, Allan R., and J. Paul Rajashekar, eds. *New Religious Movements and the Churches*. Geneva: WCC, 1987.
- Brown, Stuart E., ed. *Meeting in Faith*. Geneva: WCC, 1989.
- Bryant, M.D. "Religious Pluralism: A Fact and A God." *IRFWP Newsletter*, II. 4, 1994.
- Camps, Arnulf. *Partners in Dialogue: Christianity and Other Religions*. Transl. by John Drurg. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983.
- Cragg, Kenneth. *Christianity in World Perspectives*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1968.
- . *The Christian and Other Religions*. London: Mowbray, 1977.
- D'Costa, Gavin. *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.
- Eck, C. Diana. *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Barnabas*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.
- Encounter of Religions in African Cultures*. Geneva: LWF, 1991.

- Fornberg, Tord. *The Problem of Christianity in Multi-Religious Societies Today: The Bible in a World of Many Faiths*. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996.
- Gort, Jerald D., Hendrik M. Vroom, Rein Fernhout, and Anton Wessels, eds. *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.
- Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*. Geneva: WCC, 1979.
- Hallencreutz, Carl F. *Dialogue and Community: Ecumenical Issues in Interreligious Relationships*. Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 1977.
- Hick, J. and Askari, H. *The Experience of Religious Pluralism and Religious Education*. Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1988.
- Hick, John, and Brian Hebblethwaite, eds. *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981.
- Hick, John, ed. *Truth and Dialogue: The Relationship Between the World Religions*. London: Sheldon Press, 1974.
- Knitter, Paul F. *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*. London: SCM Press 1985.
- . *Towards a Protestant Theology of Religions*. Marburg: N.G. Elwert, 1974.
- Küng, Hans. *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths to Dialogue*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986.
- Lubbe, Gerrie, ed. *A Decade of Interfaith Dialogue in South Africa*. Johannesburg: The South African Chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, 1994.
- Martinson, Paul Varo. *A Theology of World Religions: Interpreting God, Self, and World in Semitic, Indian, and Chinese Thought*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987.
- Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1971.
- Mwakabana, Hance, and Agneta Ucko, eds. *Theological Education and Training in a Multifaith Context*. Geneva: LWF, 1995.

## *Religious Pluralism in Africa: Challenge and Response*

- Mwakabana, Hance, and Rebecca Larson, eds. *Living and Serving Humanity in a World of Religious Pluralism*. Geneva: LWF, 1995.
- My Neighbour's Faith—and Mine: Theological Discoveries through Interfaith Dialogue*. A Study Guide. Geneva: WCC, 1989.
- Neill, Stephen. *Christian Faith and Other Faiths: The Christian Dialogue with Other Religions*. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- Newbegin, Lesslie. *Christian Witness in a Pluralistic Society*. London: The British Council of Churches, 1978.
- Pobee, John S., ed. *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976.
- Panikkar, Raymond. "Inter-Religious Dialogue: Some Principles." in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Summer 1975).
- Rajashekar, J. Paul, ed. *Religious Pluralism and Lutheran Theology*. Geneva: LWF, 1988.
- , ed. *Christian-Muslim Relations in Eastern Africa*. Geneva: LWF, 1988.
- Rajashekar, J. Paul, and H.S. Wilson, eds. *Islam in Asia: Perspectives for Christian-Muslim Encounter*. Geneva: LWF, 1991.
- Rousseau, W. Richard, ed. *Interreligious Dialogue: Facing the Next Frontier*. Scranton: Ridge Row Press, 1981.
- Samartha, Stanley J. *Dialogue Between Men of Living Faiths*. Geneva: WCC, 1971.
- , ed. *Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical Issues in Inter-Religious Relations*. Geneva: WCC, 1981.
- Smart, N.A. *A Dialogue of Religions*. London: SCM Press, 1960.
- Stadler, Anton P. "Dialogue: Does it Modify, Complement or Replace Mission?" in *The Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 1, 1, p. 29.
- Taylor, John V. *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion*. London: SCM Press, 1963.
- Thomas, M.M. *Some Theological Dialogues*. Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1977.

Tillich, Paul. *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions*.  
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994.



